‘I AM THE LAST FRONTIER’: IDEALIZED ALASKAN THEMES THROUGH MEDIA AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON CULTURE, TOURISM, AND POLICY

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Abstract

A large body of literature suggests that in media history there exists prominent narrative themes about the State of Alaska. These themes affect both resident and visitor perceptions and judgements about what life is and should be in Alaska and subsequently, create values that ultimately influence how the state operates. The evolution of these themes are understood in a modern capacity in the Alaska reality television phenomenon of the early 2000's. This study concludes that the effect of these forms of media may create conflict and ultimately, may not work in the state's best interests. The researcher believes that the state has new tools to use in its image management. She recommends that new forms of media be cultivated Alaskan residents, tourism industry leaders and special interest groups as a means of alleviating the misrepresentations, expanding communication representation and developing positive visitor experiences for younger visitors who utilize new forms of media. Communication Theory, interviews and content analysis are used to present a study on Alaskan culture, its presence in media and the influence mass media has on this unique environment.

Keywords: Mass Media, Tourism, Alaska, Reality Television, Social Media, Narrative, Place Identity, New Media, User-Generated Content

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Introduction

"Memory preserves the stories, histories, triumphs, and scars of the past in an attempt to better comprehend culture, situation and identity, and often the resulting product gains a collective nature. The collectivity not only succeeds in defining and clarifying, but is also able to broaden and infuse by merging concepts and experiences that may not be immediately evident. The past is able to live through the present, and the present is able to resonate in the past. Human experience and not simply time and space, can exist as the paramount focus" (Matheson & Butler, 2012, p. 59).

This project focuses on the relationship between Alaska and multiple forms of Media. For the purpose of this study, the term "Alaska" refers to the collective culture of the state as a whole. This identity will be further defined in the literature review. The researcher utilizes the terms "narratives" and "themes" interchangeably for the purpose of this paper in referring to the thematic congruences found in stories about Alaska. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines narrative as a "way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values" and "the representation in art of an event or story" (Narrative, n.d.). It defines theme as a "subject or topic of discourse or of artistic representation" and as a "specific or distinctive quality" (Theme, n.d.). For the purpose of this paper, Alaskan themes are derived from narratives about Alaska.

The researcher seeks to answer questions regarding prominent themes in the media about Alaska, how those themes are presented and their impact. Through the lens of McLuhan's "the medium is the message" and Gerbner's cultivation theory, this project seeks to explore the similarities and disparities among forms of media, mediums and the influence they have on Alaska as a place, concept, and identity. The research utilizes content analysis of Alaskan reality

television (RT) in order to understand this cultural phenomenon, as well as it's recent and noticeable impact on the state's image.

To better understand the impact of media on the state, this research also includes in-depth interviews with both Alaskan residents and visitors which serves as an interpersonal element in portraying the themes and theories as they may be seen in interpersonal conversation . The interviews provide an understanding of both resident and non-resident beliefs, values and attitudes as they relate to Alaska. The interviews also gauge theorized media impacts on both demographics. This study utilizes extensive literature research to establish a strong background on the state as it relates to the themes, the RT analysis and the relevance of interviews. Specifically; politics, geography, Indigenous people, economics, natural resources, the tourism industry, as well as historical and modern-day experiences of residents and tourists. The researcher identifies overarching, recurring and historically stable themes found in the media about Alaska. These themes are shown to have some implicit influence in the way the above Alaskan subjects are understood, experienced and managed.

Alaska's image has been deeply influenced by the media throughout the last several hundred years, evolving and changing through each medium. Alaska's presence in the media is influential to the way the state is perceived. This was brought to a head by forms of media in which themes were clearly understood and stereotyped, which both heightened established tropes and ignited backlash as residents sought to reject them and take back their identities. Social media evolved into a focus for this study, as it exemplifies a potential change in the Alaskan myth through its ability to change communication behaviors, influence users and inspire new techniques for providing positive experiences to tourists who visit Alaska.

Ultimately, the importance of these connections lay in future choices the state's residents make in regards to media image, tourism, industry conflicts, managing natural resources and quality of life.

Literature Review

The Alaskan Identity and Place

Through the development of "place" meaning, regional identity may also be created. The development of a regional identity creates expectations, discourses, and symbols, together perpetuate unique characteristics of people from specific regions (Passi, 2003). These characteristics then create narratives and influence individuals' sensemaking of themselves and their community. When referring to "place", we consider it defined as following:

> Place is identified in terms of the relationships between physical environmental characteristics, such as climate, topography, and vegetation, and such human characteristics as economic activity, settlement, and land use. Together, these characteristics make each particular place meaningful and special to people. (Bednarz & Peterson, 1994, p. 33)

The development of place perception is largely influenced by historical, cultural, political and social structures (HoltKamp & Weaver, 2019). Yi-Fu Tuan (1979), a long-established geographical humanist and contemplator of spaces, believed that places always have a "spirit" that makes them unique (Mahoudeau, 2016). What is not seen and what is outside of the scientific paradigm lies the abstract, subjective human experience. These experiences give place its meaning. Much like McLuhan's Medium is the Message theory, Tuan (1979) frames a position of looking at what is not immediately visible when it comes to place, beyond the physicality and scientific qualities. Researchers may choose to look at specific activities that

happen within that space and how they create meaning (Mahoudeau, 2016). Places may also be formed through attempts to inspire awe or affection (Mahoudeau, 2016).

Identity is a social process. The development of a regional identity may be seen as a developing "institutionalism" (Passi, 2003, p. 478). This structure of regional identity can begin to create expectations, discourses and symbols, and within institutional practices that perpetuate that identity onto persons in varying degrees (Passi, 2003, p. 478).

Interpretations of identity can be controversial attempts at categorizations that come about through discourse and narratives (Paasi, 2003). Thus, identity is increasingly difficult and politically controversial to define.

Mass Media

The researcher's main theories are medium is the message by Marshall McLuhan (1964) and cultivation theory by George Gerbner (1976). These theories are essential in understanding how mass media functions and affects audiences. Analyzing mediums, themselves reveals the context and environment they have created in Alaska. Cultivation theory uncovers the specific narrative themes and their influence on visitors and residents.

Establishing what mass media means to this paper is essential in understanding the research and results. Mass media refers to the diverse array of technologies that reach those large populations(McLuhan, 1967), e.g. radio, televisions, books, social media, the internet, films, magazines, newspapers, and even things like billboards. Mass communication may be understood as the process of imparting and exchanging information through mass media to large segments of the population. Mass media defines and shapes our understanding of ourselves and

others (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Media utilizes storytelling to circulate the established themes to large-scale audiences (Kollin, 2002). Audiences then develop perceptions of reality based on consumed media which filter into public opinion and discourse (McLuhan, 1964; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Media affects the way we see the world, and how we act in the world. It influences us individually as well as collectively as societies and cultures (Strate, 2017).

The Medium is the Message

Marshall Mcluhan's (1964) book, *Understanding Media* introduced his theory, The Medium is the Message. McLuhan describes the media as extensions of ourselves (McLuhan, 1964). The philosopher and communications scholar sought to draw critical attention away from the content of media alone and onto the (nature of the) mediums themselves. By "medium" McLuhan was not only considering obvious mediums like television and radio, but also more subversive inclusions like our shared ideas, inventions, and ideals. For the purpose of this paper, the researcher refers to RT as a medium.

Mcluhan did not believe one should stop focusing on the media messages, but that we should also consider how the "content" of any medium affects our individual and collective lives, perhaps blinding us to the actual character of the medium (Mcluhan, 1964). This character, or context comprises everything we don't know and it influences the way we interact with each other and the world (McLuhan, 1964). These may be influenced by religious, cultural, and historical factors. They may also be affected by changing expectations, the interplay with previously existing factors, and in the long-term, shifting base-lines (Federman, 2004).

According to McLuhan, "The personal and social consequences of any medium results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves" (Foust et

al., 2017, p. 234). This means that each new medium changes us and the world we live in. While today's mediums have evolved, the relevance of this theory has not been lost over the years. Current scholars refer to McLuhan as "an oracle of the digital era" (Fishman, 2006, p. 1) and a "prophet" (Durham & Kellner, 2001) and continue to expand on Mcluhan's theory to better understand an increasingly medium-influenced world. This theory is essential for understanding the research findings here because by understanding the differences between the mediums, how new forms attempt to answer problems of previous forms and the context around each one, the indications for future research can be managed effectively.

Further study. Moreover, Harol Innis (1950) argued that social change is determined by communication technology and explored the relationship between mediums and institutions and culture (Fishman, 2006). Media that is most relevant to us in the 21st century, McLuhan referred to as "electric media" (p.7) or electronic media as well as "new media" (McLuhan, 1967). This new media or electronic media created significant change in communication structures that existed with print media. The introduction of new media motivates the creation of new content for that medium. Tony Shwartz (as referenced in Strate, 2017) states that the mediums evoke meaning based on an understanding the audience already has, and does not typically attempt to transmit novel information. In modern day, the theory continues to be utilized to study the new media of today and how the "global village" has evolved. A surge in texts such as *Reading Over McLuhan's Shoulder* (2019), *Everyman's McLuhan* (2007) and *Rethinking McLuhan* (2006) in the 21st century are keeping the McLuhan's theories relevant for modern audiences.

McLuhan states that each medium has its own bias which differs from the biases of other mediums when it comes to messaging (McLuhan, 1967). The differences between the mediums are also of significance to the critic:

> If we look at the changes between the mediums, we can better understand the mediums themselves (McLuhan, 1967). If we notice change happening, we may begin to see the presence of a new message or the effects of a new medium (Federman, 2004).

Messages are not delivered in a vacuum. They must be constructed into digestible and meaningful content (Strate, 2017). Studying the mediums themselves involves looking at how the messages are constructed and what materials are used, or in other words, the techniques and materials (Strate, 2017). McLuhan argued that technology will grow automatically and exponentially and that new technology is often an attempt to answer problems from older technology (Strate, 2017). This concept is key to understanding the significance of the study.

Additionally, the theory shows researchers that there is value in not only looking at the messages that are obvious but at the "ground" or context through those messages. This means taking into perspective the unintended consequences that come from new inventions such as RT and social media.

Literature, movies, television and now social media all come into play when one talks about where people get their ideas about the world. All of these mediums are surrounded by their own set of context or unanticipated consequences. Media influences communication, which influences behavior and thus creates a cycle of simultaneously reinforcing acts which blur the line between reality and imaginary.

Another important term coined by McLuhan is "global village". McLuhan's "global village" concept described an increasingly globalized world. Global Village refers to the daily

consumption and production of media, images and content by global audiences (National Institute of Mass Communication and Journalism, 2019). We may best understand this term as it relates to the internet. The internet is an open platform that connects the world (Lamphere, 2019). Our globalized focus means that the average person's perceptions about the world are increasingly influenced by factors outside of their immediate culture. Local issues become less important as the internet influences modern individuals and our village grows.

Cultivation Theory

George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1969) explains how television consumption can influence people's perceptions about society. Original use of this theory focuses around how TV/Film content affects viewers. Gerbner's research indicates that television viewing can have long-term effects that gradually affect the audience's understanding of the world and while reinforcing cultural norms and beliefs. Viewers who watch television (media) begin "cultivating" attitudes that may be inaccurate reflections of the real world (Gerbner et al., 1980). The more realistic the audience believes the show or movie to be, the more they will believe it reflects reality (Gerbner et al., 1980). A significant finding in Gerbner's research has been termed the "mean world syndrome". This is a cognitive bias where people believe the world is a more dangerous, or "mean" place than it actually is. Gerbner showed this was a result of moderate to heavy exposure to violence related content in the media (Gerbner, et al., 1980). The mean world syndrome has evolved to be studied in other media forms like explicit newspaper articles (Arendt, 2010) and social media (Nowak, 2018). A 2014 study by the University of Oklahoma found a correlation between viewing television about disasters and psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, anger and even PTSD (Pfefferbaum, et al., 2014).

One of the main and most relevant facets of this theory is that television (media) cultivates the status quo, not challenging it (Gerbner et al., 2002). This correlates with medium is the message. This is significant in understanding how mediums build on one another.

Beyond simply cultivating knowledge, the narratives utilized in media such as, books, movies, television and social media, if consumed regularly, may lead people who have never visited a location, to develop a curated destination image as well as feel place attachment (Fu, Ye & Xiang, 2016). Members of a community naturally develop attachment to the place they live through shared morals, values and beliefs. But research shows that these morals, values and beliefs may also be understood and idealized by those who are not directly within the community (Fu, Ye & Xiang, 2016). Media consumption that focuses on a particular place or establishes a specific reality may lead audiences' to accept media portrayals as real and factual, even if they are not (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). As such, this media cultivated perception of a place has been shown to influence tourism development (Stylidis, 2018). The connection between "place image" (Stylidis, 2018), and place attachment is under explored when it comes to Alaska.

Mass Media and Alaska

The mediums that shape our communication, the cultivation of our reality through the content and the scope of Alaskan narratives have created a looming pattern. The inspiration for the recurring themes have always been there. The environment, the influence of the Gold Rush and oil, and the cultural history of Alaskan lifestyles have been mythicized through narrative. The legends are arguably part true, part fiction. Over the years, telling them apart has grown increasingly challenging. The themes become implicit. This is due to the growing influence and pervasiveness of mass media in our modern lives.

Alaska is known to be remote. It's border sits over 5,000 miles from the nearest American border of Washington state. This remoteness has contributed to Alaska's intrigue as well as many misconceptions about the state (Kollin, 2002). Books, movies, television and now, social media have and most likely, will continue to provide prominence in the conversations that narrate the Alaskan identity.

Theorists have proven that exposure to media influences our perceptions about reality (Gerbner et al., 2002). The worlds that are built in literature, movies and television are intended to be believed, or possess qualities like fidelity and coherence (Fisher, 1984) that relate to the audience's lived experiences and logical sensibilities. Through this requirement, they may influence our beliefs. Media that show Alaska as a place, show lifestyles and introduce us to characters that live there. This creates cultural norms. These perceived norms could not survive if they had not been accepted, perpetuated, and reinforced through a variety of media channels and messages. Which leads us to our next question. How does a geographical location become an ideology?

Themes of Alaska

> <u>Idealism</u>
> "Let gross reality not intrude
> But as a bended light
> Through the prism of perception.
> To believe
> Is a necessary deception."
> Kent B. Autor - Anchorage, Alaska (Miner Pub. Co., 1976, p. 69)

Forms of media about Alaska can be traced back to Arctic explorers of the 18th century (Jody, 1969). But what about the actual name of the state? "Alaxsxaq", the Aleut name it is derived from, is translated as "mainland" or more directly "Where the action of the sea is directed"

(Ransom, 1940, p. 551). However, it is not uncommon to see the embellished mistranslation of "The Great Land", for example, in the book, *Alaska 50: Celebrating Alaska's 50th Anniversary of Statehood* (Coen, 2011, p. 97). Our "pervasive interest in the frontier" (Greenfield, 1992, p.7) and a need to embellish the place as epic reveals more about ourselves than about the location itself. The need to impart meaning onto the location ultimately leads to the location itself as metaphor for implicit meaning given by humans.

Building on these perspectives, we must look at how these themes circulate. Public opinion and public discourse are some of the strongest foundations for perceived image (Viken, 2013; Beerli & Martin, 2004). The themes discussed in the section below have been constructed and perpetuated by the act of storytelling through media (Pursell & Hogan, 2009). The five themes are as follows:

1. Alaska as "The Last Frontier"
2. A conquering mentality prevails
3. The landscape as wild emptiness
4. Stuck in the past
5. (Alaskans as) uniquely tough

Alaska as "The Last Frontier"

Alaska is widely known as "The Last Frontier". This term, deemed the state nickname has become a prominent fixture in its identity. The term also hints at the complex history of American expansionism, nostalgia for the Western frontier, and a persona that seems to satisfy a role in modern American identity (Kollin, 2001). It is an "unwieldy concept in the American mind...too vast, too remote, too cold for comfort, or belief, but too dangerously exciting to ignore" (Jody, 1969, p. 62). Alaska was purchased during a time when the country was still considering expanding its territory into Canada and beyond (Kollin, 2001). In a speech given by William Seward in March, 1848, he spoke of America's population as "destined to roll resistless waves to the icy barrier of the North" (p. 74). Alaska's place in American identity fulfills the American population's belief that there is still land to explore and ultimately, conquer (Kollin, 2001).

A Conquering Mentality Prevails

Additionally, Alaska has continued to lure Americans who may regret missing out on the adventures of the American frontier expansion (Jody, 1969). Alaska has always had resources such as timber, minerals, agriculture potential and fish & game, however, when the Klondike Gold Rush hit, people took it as an excuse to head west (north). Perhaps their last chance to fulfill a fleeting American dream, they sought the thrill of escaping civilizations, social customs and occasionally, the law (Jody, 1969). The stampede of around 100,000 people, who amassed a fortune in the Yukon, migrated to the area. Their stories captured America's imagination and bred a generation with a conquering mentality. Finding fortune was seen as "almost a national obligation" (Jody, 1969, p. 63).

The "get rich" drive was motivated not only by desire for fortune but was also spurred on by cultural and economic factors of the time. Pierre Berton (1958), in book, *The Klondike Fever*, describes how the 1893 depression and panic profoundly influenced young men to travel to Alaska, not just on the hopes of quick wealth, which typically never paid off, but also as an escape, "for one last great adventure" (Berton, 1958, p. 371).

Even twenty years into the 21st century, people still believe there is gold, glory, and redemption waiting for them in this "wild country" (Kollin, 2001, p. 45). Looking at RT programs based in Alaska, *Gold Rush*, *Bering Sea Gold*, *Wildwest Alaska* and *Yukon Men*, we can see in the titles that the legacy of the Klondike Gold Rush lives on. Resources in Alaska continue to be mined, pumped, chopped and fish at varying degrees, even as these resources slowly diminish. The controversy around the subject of managing these resources may be

influenced by the remnants of these values, since the Alaskan may feel that they must still "prove his ability to dominate nature" (Pursell & Hogan, 2009, p.188).

The Landscape as Wild Emptiness

As Alaskan tourism outreach and media narratives invite visitors in, there also exists a kind of "anti-tourist" rhetoric that attempts to protect the landscape and hide any evidence of human occupation (Kollin, 2001). In Denali National Park for instance, no human-made trails can be within view of the road park buses drive through the park on. One may find trails only two miles into the park. Beyond that, hikers must receive backcountry certification in order to explore a "trail-less" wilderness. Moreover, hikers are encouraged to stay far enough away from the road so as not to be visible to the buses (Wichelns, 2015).

These efforts of controlling the visitor's experiences promote an idealized vision of vast emptiness. Not only do hikers take in a pristine landscape, but the many thousands of visitors that ride the buses into the park will never see a sign of another human. The effects of this is that visitors believe the wilderness remains untouched, and that the animals still reign the landscape (Kollin, 2001). John Muir, the wilderness folk hero, wrote in his 1915 book, *Travels in Alaska*, "To the lover of pure wildness, Alaska is one of the most wonderful countries in the world" (Jody, 1969, p 29).

The habit of painting landscapes as empty in America can be traced back to the journals of Lewis and Clark, who even as they acknowledged and interacted with Indigenous populations, described landscapes and aspects of nature with a rhetoric of a wild emptiness (Greenfield, 1992). During the expansionist era of American history, there have existed contradictions in the relationship between nature and indigenous populations (Greenfield, 1992). American literary

romanticism flourished as Native Americans were being forcibly removed from their lands. Greenfield (1992) quotes an excerpt from the 1930 compilation of D.H. Lawrence writings, *The Spirit of Place*, who pondered this relationship in the 20th century, "No place exerts its full influence upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed" (p. 4). Alaskan expansion often came at the expense of the Indigenous culture, by destroying or assimilating them. The fantasy that the land has never been explored is equally inconsistent with the attitudes towards native Americans during the western expansion era (Greenfield, 1992; Kollin, 2001; Jody, 1969).

In the 21st century, Alaska is still portrayed as untouched. Marty Raney, a character referred to as a "mountain man" on the reality show, *Ultimate Survival Alaska,* was quoted in a 2013 interview with the *New York Daily News* as saying, "In Alaska, if you go a mile off a road almost anywhere in the state, you're putting your foot on ground that has never been walked before by any human being. Ever" (Hinckley, 2013, para 4). Later in the article, the journalist would refer to the land Raney spoke of as "virgin" (para 5), a popular term used in discourse about the state. This type of mentality still permeates a landscape that has a long history of being utilized for resources extraction, leased out to oil companies, inhabited by immigrants and influenced by federal systems like the U.S. military and The National Park Service (Kollin, 2001).

Nevertheless, our relationship with the natural world is of significance when it comes to identity. By imagining the wilderness as empty, we make it passive. "Nature is always a highly contested area that never speaks for itself" (Kollin, 2002, p. 22). This conflicts with indigenous beliefs about community over the individual and an understanding of nature not as an

unchanging, stoic resource but as an evolving, adaptive, and active presence (Kollin, 2002). Concepts about the Alaskan identity, specifically the "Frontiersman identity" tend to marginalize Alaskan natives and their cultural ways of understanding the world (Pursell & Hogan, 2009). The muting of indigenous perspectives and cultural ways of knowing is both inherent and extremely prevalent within the expansionist American ideology. This is a theme that seems to directly contradict reality.

Stuck in the Past

The media representations of Alaska provide the impression that life in the state has not changed much since the days of the gold rush (Jody, 1969). Framing Alaska as existing in a previous time has been occuring in literature since the beginning. In Jack London's (1903) *Call of the Wild*, the first chapter is titled, "Into the Primitive". As one reads, they will find this type of framing, such as "He had been suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial" (London, 1903, p. 39). The use of the term "Primordial" places Alaska in prehistoric times.

Chris McCandles, the subject of John Krakauer's posthumous biography, *Into the Wild* said, "I don't want to know what time it is. I don't want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters." (Krakauer, 2011, p. 120). Part of the appeal of Alaska is the way it seems distant from current societal problems. Its placement in the past makes life in Alaska seem simpler, focused on simply surviving as opposed to modern American problems. This perceived distance of both space and time allows visitors to feel disconnected from their lives and thus, from modern day culture (Kollin, 2001).

Alaska's identity is perhaps attached to America's nostalgic past. Authors Timothy Pursell and Maureen Hogan, Fairbanks residents and historians, write about Alaskan nostalgia in the 2009 collection, *Images of the North: History - Identity - Ideas*. Nostalgia can be seen as a key to understanding this theme as it relates to the Alaskan identity. Their contributing article, "Alaska's Eternal Frontier: Rural Masculinity and Landscape Nostalgia", explains their term "restorative nostalgia". They specifically reference Fairbanks businesses like "Gold hill Liquor," "Prospector Outfitters" and "Pioneer Park", its name only recently and controversially changed (Kollin, 2001) from AlaskaLand. These names and spaces embody the nostalgic tropes that attempt to restore an outdated identity (Hogan & Pursell, 2008).

However these unrealistic imaginative modes allow visitors and residents alike to feel as if they've gone back in time to a place that does not seem to exist anymore in the continental United States, where the resources and landscapes are untainted by humans. An increasingly globalized world may also play a role in the nostalgia for the American frontier (Hogan & Pursell, 2008). In a lecture, Mcluhan said of nostalgia, "When people are stripped of their personal identities, they develop huge nostalgia" ([mywebcowtube], 2011. Marshall Mcluhan Full lecture: The medium is the message - 1977 part 3 v 3).

Due to the reinforcement of these nostalgic tropes, they have both become "trademarks" for Alaska, and a main motivator for Alaskan tourism (Hogan & Pursell, 2008). Visitors are able to purchase this rural nostalgia with their all inclusive corporate, pre-planned vacations and therefore buy the appearance of Alaskan identity, if only temporarily. Residents also buy their way into this identity by engaging in outdoor recreational activities built to harness a sense of frontiersman identity. "Excursions" are not just for cruise ship customers, but for anyone willing

to invest in the thousands of dollars worth of high tech gear needed for these types of "off the grid" backcountry trips. Ironically, it is typically the use of the newest gear and technological luxuries that allow for experiencing this pioneer past image (Kollin, 2001). As the majority of the state lives in urban environments, it is only the select few who can afford these types of frontiersman experiences (Kollin, 2001).

Uniquely Tough

75% of Alaska's population lives in cities, with more than half residing in and around the Anchorage area alone (Medred, 2014). Yet, there is a persistent theme that Alaskans are tougher and/or more unique than the average American. Granted, Alaska does experience colder than average temperatures and drastically different hours of sunlight and there exists a small population of rural residents who live subsistence lifestyles. In Anchorage, where the majority of the population resides, the lowest temperatures are milder than parts of the lower 48, including Minnesota where temperatures can dip to 60 below during winter (Department of Natural Resources, n.d.). The lines between urban and rural areas are increasingly blurred (McKnight et al, 2017) as modern consumer culture creeps into the landscape. Modern luxuries are within reach to most Alaskans and the life of an average Anchorage resident is one of urban consistency (Hogan & Pursell, 2009). The insistence that even the 21st century Alaskans are living a pioneer life of primeval struggle reinforces the stereotype that all Alaskans are inherently tougher than the rest of the country (Hogan & Pursell, 2009).

The relationship between Alaskans and Chris McCandless' story is an example of residents taking part in this distancing. The belief that Alaskans know better than he did is common, even by those who may have little to know backcountry experience (Hogan & Pursell,

2008). Alaskans perform the role of Alaskan, "special and unique - a rare breed of Americans that can handle a rugged, cold Alaska" (Hogan & Pursell, 2008, p. 196). Like the other themes, this one has been born from truth, and though some Alaskans may lead more difficult lifestyles, this truth continues to be used as a blanket statement.

For centuries, the media has impacted how we sensemake ourselves and others. Though various forms of media such as books and the internet, the core themes about Alaska, regardless of fact or fiction have been created and perpetuated.

Mediums

Books

Literature about Alaska dates back hundreds of years and sets the stage for Alaska's narrative myth (Jody, 1969). The last 200 years of Alaskan literature has been filled with stories of extremes, stereotypical characters and rhetorical patterns. Narratives tend to romanticise the morals, values and beliefs that are not representational of Alaska or all its residents (Kollin 2001, Hogan & Pursell, 2007). Authors Robert Service and Jack London have been called "leaders in setting a pattern" when it comes to inaccuracies and nonrepresentational literature about Alaska (Jody, 1969, p 186).

The medium itself is worth understanding because of the rise of Alaskan literature, nature literature, western literature and exploration literature. All of this literature has been studied and criticised by countless critics and researchers. The purpose of expounding on this medium (partially) is to remind the reader of a few of the most prominent authors and texts, speak briefly to theircultural significance and explore the ones that are relevant to this body of work.

When one speaks of Alaskan literature, it would be hard to ignore the subject of gender. Titles like, "*A Gentleman Adventurer"*, and "*The Men who Blazed the Trail*" are some of many gender-focused books one may find in the Alaskan section of the University of Alaska Fairbanks library. These titles and their contents reveal a well-known fact about Alaska. It is a land defined by masculinity and masculine qualities (Hogan & Pursell, 2008). Male voices dominated the Alaskan conversation with prolific, successful writers of the 20th century like Margeret Murie, Eliza Scidmore, and Lois Crisler being largely left out of the mainstream conversation (Kollin, 2001). These masculine stories allowed personas like the frontiersman identity to become normalized and idealized as the face of Alaskan myth (Kollin, 2001). Masculine qualities eb and flow with the current culture and are always difficult to define. The masculinity that defined the early Alaskan literature was focused on a personal and nostalgic relationship with the wilderness. He was typically white, strong, and struggles with nature, as well as with marginalized other identities (Hogan & Pursell, 2008). The Alaska urban masculinity was and is still today "othered" by this type of masculinity, even if one lives in an urban environment (Hogan & Pursell, 2008).

Literature tropes like the solo man venturing out into the wilderness to conquer some hidden factor (McLuhan) focused the American imagination on a romanticized, individualistic dream, encapsulated by a male character. This dream would motivate thousands of men, and women to pursue a new life in the north under an assumption that it was a type of spiritual pilgrimage. McLuhan speaks of American literature like Thoreau, Melville and Henry James as examples of this particular pattern. The environment was the enemy and thus, from the beginning

of America's history, literature has pursued this aggressive action against nature (McLuhan, 1964).

The most famous and resilient narratives are books like *Call of the Wild* by Jack London (1903), *Songs of a Sourdough* by Robert Service (1907), and most recently, *Into the Wild*, by John Krakauer (1996). Even so, countless others have all followed these masculine narrative tropes of taming nature, fighting the elements and subduing nature (McLuhan, 1964). Modern Alaska continues to be defined by the masculine qualities of the past.

These stories stretch through time and inspire the writers of the future. John Muir held a copy of Thoreau's Walden (1854) on his first trip to Alaska and shared many of the transcendental tendencies written by both Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson (Jody, 1969).

These ultimate themes of masculinity and man vs. nature have even been identified by McLuhan (1977) who, in a lecture given at John Hopkins University, describes some of the most beloved morals, values and beliefs found in American literature:

> 200 years ago or more, our people came to this continent to fight nature, to tame the wilderness and to subdue the elements. This typically led them out of doors to a kind of aggressive action against the environment. The environment was the enemy. It had to be subdued, tamed. This developed a habit of going outside to fight. You'll find this peculiar pattern in all american literature. Whether it's Thoreau, Melville or Henry James. The characters in these books are loners on a quest for some hidden factor in their lives. This is a theme that I wish to relate to the medium. ([mywebcowtube, 2016, Marshall McLuhan 1977 - Full Lecture John Hopkins University on Global Village and the Tetrad).

It is this type of literature that influenced early Alaskan writers. Jack London, who lived and worked in the area during the Klondike Gold Rush, is one of the most prolific of the Northern Literature writers with adaptations of *Call of The Wild* culturally persistent. Though some of his stories were inspired by true events (London, 1903, p. 98), much of his writing was expanded into "heroic tales of Darwinism in action" (Jody, 1969, p. 154). London sought to write the

ultimate epic of the west (Jody, 1969), and his regional focus on Alaska reveals the "development of Alaska as a frontier experience for the national character" (Jody, 1969, p. 156).

One of the most recent and influential books in the Alaskan canon may be *Into the Wild*. The "complicated, compelling story" (Slotnik, 2016, para 7), based on true events, was originally a 1993 article for *Outside Magazine*, later became a bestselling book, published in 1996 by John Krakauer. Finally it was adapted into a film, released in 2007. *Into the Wild* tells the true story of Chris McCandless, who after graduating college, burns his Social Security Card, donates his savings and hitchhikes to Alaska in a kind of frontiersman pilgrimage, largely inspired by literature (Medred, 2016). McCandless ends up in an abandoned school bus, near Healy, Alaska where he ultimately dies of starvation in August of 1992 (Saverin, 2013). The author, Krakauer, positions multiple theories involving poisonous potato seeds and mushrooms into the discourse, which have seemingly been debunked (Medred, 2016).

The book is focused around McCandless, and his alter ego Alexander Supertramp's journal, which was found with his body. Krakauer used the entries to create a character that captivated a large audience. Krakauer has been reported to have used creative liberties with their interpretation (Medred, 2016).

The success of the book, especially with young adults, has led to a type of "pilgrimage" to the bus, located on the Stampede Trail. Holland (2019) reported that it's estimated a couple hundred hikers attempt to make their way to the bus each year. However, it is a difficult hike. Most of the danger comes from the presence of the Teklanika river, which must be crossed to reach the "magic bus". The difficult river crossing has made for many inexperienced hikers in need of rescue as well as a handful of deaths as recent as 2019 (Saverin, 2013; D'Oro, 2020).

Troopers in the area estimated around 75% of their rescues happened on Stampede Trail in 2013 (Saverin, 2013).

Alaskan residents have expressed little sympathy for McCandles or hikers who attempt to reach the bus (Saverin, 2013; D;Oro, 2013; D'Oro, 2020; Medred, 2016). It has become a topic of conversation in which locals enact an "us" and "them" mentality (Medred, 2016). Regional identity, or regional consciousness, also contains the component of "us" vs. "them" (Passi, 2003). We can see this performed in Alaskan discourse in the example of the Chris McCandless story and is also typically directed towards anyone who lives in the "lower 48" or anywhere outside of Alaska.

Alaskans reference McCandless as ideological, inexperienced, and ill-prepared (D'Oro, 2013). The persistence of pilgrimage rescues on the Stampede Trail strengthens this local perspective that "outsiders", or people from the "lower 48" aren't as tough or capable as Alaskans (Hogan & Pursell, 2007). In February of 2020, the Denali Borough proposed moving the bus to a safer location in order to address the ongoing problem. McCandless' sister expressed her opinion on the move:

> It is not Chris's story they are following, it is their own, even if they don't realize it at the time. . . And as far as the lure of the bus - it's not about the bus, either. If the bus is moved, people will simply erect a memorial in its place and continue to go there. (D'Oro, 2020, para 17)

Krakauer has said of controversy, "Some people see an idiot. Some people see themselves. I'm the latter, for sure" (Slotnik, 2016, para 10). It is obvious that the story resonates with audiences. Severin (2013) interviewed numerous pilgrims who seemed to gain spiritual experiences from their trek to the bus. Moreover, Sabastian Groes, (2019) connects the location to the content,

"His strange spiritual quest can partly be explained by the imaginative immensity Alaska embodies" (GRoes, 2019, p. 980).

Ultimately, the connection is through American literature. McCandless' motivations can be tied to his fascination with Thoureau, Tolstoy and London. McCandless' intentional ignorance of the practicality of living in the wild may be a symptom of desire to "transcend the imaginative limits of the human position by becoming one with nature" (Groes, 2019, p. 981), which may be a consequence of idealizing the western literature mentioned. This example illustrates the pervasiveness of this kind of literature.

The literature of Alaska has grown exponentially since the days of London and Service. Native voices, female voices and many other diverse groups can be found on the bookshelves of almost any Alaska section. The pattern of development is similar to other forms of American frontiers (Marilyn, 1969), yet somehow, Alaska has maintained a myth of the eternal frontier. With the rise in alternative mediums, this myth lives on in new ways.

Movies

Movies and television have similar functional expectations. TV movies are an example of the melding of the two mediums. This section will focus on the content of selected movies. In the television section, there is further analysis on the mediums themselves and how audiences interact with them.

The concepts that have grown from the evolution of the Alaskan identity have become so ingrained in popular culture, that the location itself can be used as a metaphor (Groes, 2019). In the movie, *Ex Machina*, Alaska becomes a kind of character as the movie's backdrop. The landscape brings to mind the empty wilderness of a, "deep, organic past, devoid of humanity"

(Groes, 2019, p. 988). The setting serves as a dreamscape for the idealistic intentions of the two main, male characters. The film ultimately shows the failure of these men to conquer, colonize, and control their environment and technology (Groes, 2019).

El Camino, the movie sequel to the popular show, *Breaking Bad*, also plays with deeply rooted social notions about what Alaska means to the American and individual identities. Alaska serves as the main character's fantasy. Critics regard the plot device as creating an unrealistic fantasy, "too impossible" to be deemed likely by the viewers (Desta, 2019). The show's creator, Vince Gilligan joked after the end of *Breaking Bad* he could see the character Jesse Pinkman escaping to the state (Desta, 2019) and this comment was later turned into plot development. Spoiler alert: He does go there. The final line in the movie participates in rhetoric related to the themes of the paper. "It's quiet", Jesse observes when he steps off the truck and onto the snow (Desta, 2019). The audience understands what he means.

It is important to note one movie, already mentioned, which continues to play a role in the Alaskan image as well as actual life in the state. *Into the Wild*, mentioned earlier, is one of the most popular and controversial media narratives about Alaska in recent years (McAlpin, 2014). People argue if the popularity would have grown to the extent that it did, if the book had simply remained a book. Actor Sean Penn received rights from the McCandless family after a fascination with the story, which motivated him to adapt it into a movie screenplay (McAplin, 2014). The 2007 movie has had lasting effects as a symbol for individualism, anti-capitalism, and the adventuring spirit (McAplin, 2014). It is hard to say which has had a more profound effect, the book or the film, though the pilgrimages to the sacred bus increased after the release of the film (Medred, 2018).

Regardless, the Alaskan movie legacy lives on. On February 21, 2020, a new film adaptation of Jack London's novel *Call of the Wild*, was released in theaters, starring Harrison Ford. The film did well in theaters, with an estimated $28.2 million in domestic revenue its opening weekend (Cohn, 2020).

Reality TV (RT)

Toeing the line between "real" and heavily mediated is reality television (RT). As RT began to expand in the early 2000's, producers saw a profitable market for showcasing the "Alaskan life" through the RT lens. Although the individuals featured on RT programs are not paid, and the purpose of the show is not explicitly stated as "entertainment", the motivation for participation may be a desire to capitalize on fame and many have (Wells, 2015). Critics argue that RT is "neoliberal" (Wells, 2015; Redden, 2018; Grazian, 2010; McCarthy, 2007).

Neoliberalism is defined as an ideology or policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition (Smith, 2019). The neoliberal discourse promotes the cultural values of a productive work ethic, autonomy, choice, competitive individualism, self-responsibility, initiative, self-control, and self-reliance (Shoshana, 2015). While RT is a way to tell true stories of real people (Wells, 2015), the rise in this popular medium has led to the creation of a large RT market in which many continue to profit.

Both Alaska programming's "neoliberalism" approach and attention to a "lower class" of characters (Wells, 2015) may be some of the key factors for understanding the popularity of these programs and their effect on the audience. A *New York Times* reviewer suggested that the link between the presentation of authenticity in *The Deadliest Catch* may be one of the main factors in its popularity with viewers (Hale, 2007). One of the show's producers Thom Beers

referenced his mentality on the subject in an interview, saying, "What I look for is authenticity in my shows...no celebrity stuff" (Wells, 2015, p. 35). Though the genre tends to present characters as real, critics argue that what tends to happen is a stereotyping of individuals, especially any individual that is an ethnic minority, such as Alaska native (Shoshana, 2015).

People tend to view RT as "not feeling real" (Lundy et al., 2008, p. 222). Alaska's reputation as an "authentic space" (Kollin, 2002) may have been seen as transferable to the programs, with outside critics describing the state as "conducive" to this type of programming (Hinckley, 2013). Just as the people of the programs are authentically portrayed, the perception of Alaska alludes to another layer in the relationship between Alaska and RT. The culturally constructed myth of Alaska as the eternal frontier, ripe with adventure, perhaps allows for the programs to take on an equally mythic power, or at least contributes to their credibility (Wells, 2015).

Equally important, as Thom Beers, the producer for *The Deadliest Catch*, spoke to *Men's Magazine* mentioned about one of the potential draws of the show, "We take you to places you would never go" (Wells, 2015, p. 35). The flexibility of a neoliberal economy and favorable policies allowed television producers to take advantage of an untapped market, perfect for the genre (Grazian, 2010) at the same time as the state was seeking to expand and capitalize on the tourism market. It is also possible that RT negatively impacted the state's image, especially to its own residents.

Timeline Of Reality TV in Alaska. The first RT show based in Alaska was *The Deadliest Catch* in 2005. *The Deadliest Catch* is considered one of the all around highest rated and most "real" programs of the RT genre (Medred, 2014). The success of *The Deadliest Catch*,

inspired by the film *The Perfect Storm*, spawned a growing interest in working class life in Alaska (Wells, 2015). After the enactment of the Alaska Film Tax Credit in 2008 under Sarah Palin, the industry boomed (O'Malley, 2014). The credit was put into place to "attract feature films, create local jobs and publicize the state's charms" (Kizzia, 2015, para 6). Around one-third of a project's expenses could be subsidized, funded by the state (Kizzia, 2015, para 5). Special emphasis was placed on those projects that utilized Alaskan businesses. Alaska was not the only state that has enacted a tax credit program or MPI (Movie Production Incentive). When Alaska created the incentive, there were already dozens of American states with similar incentives (Luther, 2010). This credit was regulated by the Alaska Film Office, a state agency which is no longer in existence, and the office maintained the right to approve or deny any project's application to film in the state (Kizzia, 2015). At the height of Alaskan RT, there were around 20 programs in some level of production in 2014. Between 2009 and 2013, the state approved 65 show applications (O'Malley, 2014).

Anchorage Dispatch News columnist, Emily Fehrenbacher, describes a story shared with her by *National Geographic's Extreme Survival Alaska* Executive Producer, Brian Catalina:

> He was traveling down the Yukon River filming, when he came upon a remote fish camp. He stopped at the fish camp thinking it would be perfect for his cast to interact with the fishermen. When he asked if they could film the men at the fish camp, one of the men said "I've got a deal with Discovery Channel for a show, and I'm exclusive to them."

That show would become *Yukon Men*. Even on one of the most remote rivers in Alaska, people had TV programs in the works (Fehrenbacher, 2018, para 10). This illustrates the height of Alaska's reality TV trajectory and the growth from the earlier times of *The Deadliest Catch's* Alaskan monopoly (Fehrenbacher, 2016).

During this time, however, the backlash began. Alaskan residents were reported to be unhappy with the programs and the industry (O'Malley, 2014; Kizzia, 2015; Boyce, 2016; Hollander, 2016; Medred, 2014). Critics wondered why the state was allowing "cringe-worthy shows to become the face of the state" (Kizzia, 2015). Shortly after the backlash began, the state responded by making subsidy records confidential in 2014 (Kizzia, 2015, para 6).

In June of 2015, Governor Bill Walker eliminated the tax credit, though it would not fully expire until 2018. At that time, Around $50 million in tax credits had been paid (Bohrer, 2015). Global oil prices were down and as a state that relies heavily on oil tax revenue, the independent governor referenced Alaska's troubled economy for his decision (Bohrer, 2015, para 4). Proponents for the elimination of the tax had also been arguing that very little (15%) of the expected revenue was actually going to residents of Alaska. Outside production crews, who rarely utilized local labor were reaping the financial benefits (O'Malley, 2014). This was partially due to the state not having a workforce that was large enough to accomodate the production companies (Palomino, 2014).

Even though at the time of the elimination of the tax credit, the media market was still on the rise (Palomino, 2014), It was shortly after the elimination that the RT boom in Alaska began to dwindle. In a 2017 *Anchorage Daily News* article called, "Are reality TV shows set in Alaska finally going out of style?", Fehrenbacher, the columnist, mulled over the potential reasons for the demise of Alaskan RT, listing off: an oversaturated market, the elimination of the film tax, and the rise of streaming services (Fehrenbacher, 2017). In 2018, the decrease in content led Fehrenbacher, who spent five years writing about the phenomenon, to resign from covering the genre and declare the industry of over 60 programs dead (Fehrenbacher, 2018).

It's hard to identify the reason for the decline. In 2020, the more popular programs live on, for now. At the end of its final season in 2019, the once hit-show, *Alaskan Bush People* was experiencing its lowest number of viewers in the season's history ("Alaskan Bush People", 2019). programs like *Alaska*, *The Last Frontier*, and *Life Below Zero*, continue to air episodes in 2019, but it is unclear what their future may hold.

Social Media as a Medium

The internet has provided countless new sub-genres of mediums, but none as popular as social media. 3.5 Billion people are now on social media (Stoll, 2019). Currently, memes, which consist of pictures or videos make up some of the most seen and shared content on the internet (Lamphere, 2019). The rapid spread of "Fake news" has become a defining characteristic of the social media medium (Moravec et al., 2019), influencing national elections and changing our relationship to concepts such as"fact-checking", terms like "viral" and communication tools such as the "like" and "sharing" buttons (Li & Xie, 2020). Social media as a medium is worth researching, as communication scholars suggests it may be introducing a new communication paradigm, fragmenting audiences through the variety of digital platforms and channels people now have access to (Jenkins, 2016).

All social media sites rely on user-generated content (UGC). Platforms such as Instagram spread this UGC relies on a combination of visual and textual elements in which users may often share personal narratives. The medium even goes as far to name the temporary video components of the interfaces "stories". This use of narrative elements, mixed with authentically produced media may have powerful effects on influencing our perception of reality and our "paradigms for truth" (Fisher, 1984).

Social media cultivates reality in its own way. Due to the "authentic" style of the platforms, users can be influenced by others in a deeper, yet familiar way. We forget that content generated through social media can also cultivate an inaccurate sense of reality, believing that everything shared on social media is the truth.

Through the use of social media, we have become increasingly reliant on online communities for economic, social, political and many other facets of daily life. 35% of Millennial travelers post misleading pictures on their vacation to make things seem better than they are (Allianz Global Assistance USA, 2018). The growth of online communities mirrors McLuhan's use of the term "global village", which describes the constant shrinkage of cultural boundaries due to instantaneous sharing of those cultures (McLuhan, 1967).

Attitudes toward online openness have also been shifting. In the early days of the internet and social media, it was considered risky to meet up with someone you met online to purchase something and especially to date. Now, with Facebook's Marketplace and apps like Tinder, these things are commonplace (Lamphere, 2019). People tend to trust UGC more than traditional marketing (Mendes, 2017). The UGC helps them imagine themselves in the same place, snapping the same photos and then posting them. Websites that utilize UGC see a 29% increase in their conversion rate (Morrison, 2016), meaning users are more likely to purchase something if it is advertised through UGC.

Social Media and Travel. For the tourism industry, residents in a destination can function as authentic UGC or "place ambassadors" (Uchinika et al., 2019). The constant increase in mobile phone camera quality has led to social media users sharing their own photos while on the go. This transitions users into "active proponents" for tourism instead of passive targets. Instagram allows for users to search a destination using location tagging and hashtags. Furthermore, the website can sort posts by most "popular" or "recent" so that users can see the top tourist locations. By posting travel photos, the average user is influencing the potential travel plans of others who see their posts. About 95 million photos are shared on Instagram each day, many of which utilize hashtags and location sharing (Mendes, 2017).

Additionally, Millennials have come to depend on social media sites like Instagram to find new travel destinations (Mendes, 2017). Searching through real posts from real residents allows for the implication of "authenticity". If residents are participating in the "tourist gaze" by means of their photo sharing, the UGC can function as a more effective form of marketing for the destination than traditional practices (Uchinika et al., 2019). Images have been shown to increase user engagement on social media (Li & Xie, 2020).

Posting vacation pictures on Instagram or Facebook has replaced the event of sitting down and showing your friends and family an album of your trip (Stoll, 2019). Consumers can share, rate and review their experiences all with the touch of a button. Social media has become an integral part of the travel industry. Social media has allowed for anyone to share their thoughts, opinions and skills with the world. Posts, especially by influential brand ambassadors inspire users to mimic their behavior, leading users to purchase the same items and then eventually, posting themselves (Stoll, 2019). 52% of Facebook users say their friend's post

inspired their travel plans. 74% of travelers utilize social media while traveling, with 97% of millennials post on social media while traveling (Gigante, 2018).

It is also important to remember that the rise of the review culture demands engagement from businesses to stay relevant. Studies show that people are more likely to express their opinions and/or complain online than in person (Li & Xie, 2020). 32 percent of consumers trust a stanger's review over traditional advertising messages (Mendes, 2017). Social media allows for businesses to market and communicate directly with customers in an inexpensive way, which can be especially helpful in dealing with the inevitable negative reviews (Li & Xie, 2020). It is clear that social media is an important skill for any tourism industry to understand (Stoll, 2019).

In order to understand how the mediums and their themes affect Alaska, one must know Alaska. The history, policy, demographics, culture and other facets that make Alaska what it is are outlined below.

The Real Alaska

Just like the TV programs, the real Alaska may also have an uncertain future. But it's historical role within the United States has been clearly defined and predetermined. Through a brief history of Alaska and overview of Alaska today one can see the differences in media narratives vs. reality.

Population & Demographics

In 2019, it was estimated that the population of Alaska was 731,000, which is rapid growth from the estimated 100,000 citizens at the end of WWII (State of Alaska, n.d.). As such there are .93 square miles for each person. By comparison, New York has .003 square miles per person (State of Alaska, n.d.). The demographic breakdown in Alaska is slightly higher in men

(376,000) than women (354,000), with 481,000 identifying as white and about 113,000 identifying as Alaska Native (State of Alaska, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, n.d.). There are five distinct regions in the state. Each region is unique with its own personality, tourist attractions, and geographical features. The two most popular regions for Alaskan tourism are the Alaskan Coast and the Interior.

The Alaskan Geography

Alaska is 586,000 square miles. It is one-fifth the size of the continental United States, which makes it bigger than Texas, California and Montana, combined. Alaskans refer to the lower United States as the "lower 48". It has 17 of the 20 tallest mountains in the U.S., two-thirds of national parklands and over 100,000 glaciers (Lynch & Miller, 2020). Alaska is home to the top two largest National forests, and the most National Parks in the country. Much of the 100 million acres dedicated to national parks, preserves, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas were set aside in 1980 (Lynch & Miller, 2020). The highest peak in North America, Mount Denali, sits in the Alaska Range, north of Anchorage.

The Alaskan Coast. While about 731,000 citizens inhabit the 586,000 square miles, 40% of the Alaskan population reside in Anchorage, the state's largest city (World Population Review, n.d.). The Mat-Su region, which is Anchorage and nearby, smaller towns like Wasilla and Palmer total about 400,000 people. The Anchorage area boasts a milder climate, ice-free ports, and is the center for all air, rail, and road systems. It's also the headquarters for Alaska's major banks, federal agencies, corporations, and state and federal administrative agencies (Lynch & Miller, 2020).

An additional 80,000 people live in the Gulf Coast region. Another 42,000 reside in the Southwest region of Alaska and 72,000 in the Southeast. Juneau, Alaska's capital sits in the southeast and is not accessible by any road. It has a wet, mild climate. Alaska's Inside Passage is in this region. This is the popular route taken by the majority of cruise ships during the summer season with stops in Haines, Skagway, and Ketchikan. These smaller communities are heavily reliant on the tourism industry in the summer months, which typically bring in over 1 million cruise ship passengers through their maritime streets.

The Interior of Alaska. It is estimated that about 109,000 citizens live in the Interior. The interior is one of the last hubs of human activity on the singular, gravel highway, called the Dalton Highway, which connects The North Slope to the rest of the state's highway systems. The "haul road" is the subject of the Reality TV program *Ice Road Truckers*. Fairbanks, the second largest city in the state and the last city on the haul road, heading north, is considered the coldest city in America (World Population Review, n.d.). Originally a gold rush town, trade, transportation services, military bases and one of the main branches of The University of Alaska

now comprise the area. It is a popular destination for Northern Lights viewing and hot springs, making winter tourism popular in this region.

History of Alaska

Oil

Alaska is known for being an American hub for oil extraction. The beginning of the state's modern oil history began when the first oil well was drilled near Eureka, Alaska in 1953. On March 13, 1968, oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay, also known as The North Slope. In 1969, the North Slope Oil lease sale, which sold drilling rights to oil companies brought in $900 million for the state. Residents who leased land in the area, environmental groups, and Alaska Native groups opposed the sale.

Oil and Alaskan's rights. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971, the largest land claim settlement in American history, gave native rights to about 10% of Alaska and nearly $1 billion dollars in restitution for ending Alaska Native people's ability to live a completely subsistence lifestyle (Lynch & Miller, 2020). This piece of legislation has a controversial place in the Alaskan identity, especially for Alaska Native people. The ANCSA was an attempt to settle over 100 years of Alaska Native land claim disputes. It established 13 Alaska Native regional corporations with title to claims on over 40 million acres of land. The corporations are not tribes, but economic entities and represent individuals from regional areas. These Alaska Native members are shareholders and paid annual dividends (Hardin & Rowland-Shea, 2018). Author Alexis Bunton, an Alaskan Native, describes this period of time in Alaska:

> Powerful non- Natives in industry and government worked hard to prevent Alaska Natives from fighting these social injustices through Jim Crow laws and discriminatory policies. Even after Alaska Natives gained equal rights and protections under federal law, policies such as the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act proved merely a smokescreen to pressure Alaska Natives to assimilate to non- Native economic and governing structures, under the guise of massive payouts for lands slated for big oil development (Bunton, 2015, p. 5).

With the passing of ANCSA in 1973, after years of delays due to controversy around potential damage to natural life, construction for the Trans-Alaska pipeline was authorized. The 800 mile pipeline would carry oil from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. This began another economic boom for the state with 70,000 people working on it's seven year construction (Alyeska, 2019).

During this period, the legislature enacted the Alaska Permanent Fund. The Permanent Fund is a program unique to the state. The state pays out a yearly dividend check to every Alaskan resident based on the interest it generates from investing the revenue from oil, gas, and mineral reserves (Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation, n.d.). At its creation in 1976, the fund was not meant to pay residents directly, but was seen as a potential source for emergency relief (Bradner & Bradner, 2019).

As the economy changed, so did the fund. Politicians who created the fund in 1976 by amending the Alaska Constitution gave the future government the right to adapt the fund as needed. Dividends were added in 1981 (Bradner & Bradner, 2019). Other countries have followed in Alaska's footsteps. Norway's oil and gas savings fund, created in 1996 and modeled after the PFD, has been a success with funds reading $1 trillion in market value in 2019 (Bradner & Bradner, 2019).

Until the 1980's, Alaska experienced an economic oil boom. However, due to a severe drop in global oil prices in the 1980's, Alaska experienced a major recession which impacted

Alaskan life. Many Alaskans lost their jobs. Budgets and funds were slashed. As a result, Anchorage's population was lowered by about 30,000 people (State of Alaska, n.d.).

Exxon Spill

Ultimately, the 1980's proved a difficult time for Alaska with the decade ending with the infamous Exxon Valdez oil spill on March 24th, 1989. This widely publicized disaster, deemed the worst oil spill in American history, spilled 11 million gallons of oil into the Prince William Sound area. The spill seems especially traumatic for the nation, since it happened in Alaska, widely regarded as the epitome of natural beauty and the "last" of its kind (Kollin, 2001). The management of oil cleanup was heavily criticized to have been rushed and ineffective, instead of thorough. Moreover, media reports focused more on the impact to Alaska's identity as the last frontier and less on the impacts to native and local communities (Kollin, 2001).

The implications of the Exxon Valdez oil spill would eventually influence conversations globally about regulating the oil industry and managing major environmental disasters. That same year, and perhaps in response to the disaster, the Alaskan legislature closed the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to any oil development (Lynch & Miller, 2020). But, this would eventually change.

Alaska Today

Modern Alaska Culture

The modern Alaskan landscape is hardly a frontier, these days. The time of homesteading dreams are long gone. The phrase, "The Last Frontier" acts less as a descriptor and more as a historical identity marker (Kollin, 2002).

Life for the modern day Alaskan, outside of villages can look much like modern day culture in the lower 48. Some may choose an isolated life, but most live in city structures, driving modern cars, utilizing modern technology for everyday life, living in modern homes and shopping at the same box stores in southern states (State of Alaska, n.d.). Alaska's larger communities have theaters, museums, fast-food restaurants, art galleries, modern health care facilities, and a state-wide university system, which consists of multiple, globally respected research institutions. All of these factors contribute to a fairly normal, American life for most Alaskans.

Alaska's Modern Economy

Alaska's economy is driven mostly by Oil, Tourism and Fishing, in that order (State of Alaska, n.d.). Timber, mining, and agriculture are also of importance to the state. Nearly 85% of the state's budget is provided by the Oil industry. The state also contains half of the nation's coal reserves and the largest amount of silver and zinc in the country. Alaska is the number one producer of salmon in the world, with 6 billion pounds harvested each year (State of Alaska, n.d.). However, there is currently much debate about the sustainability of the salmon industry. In recent years, with record low salmon counts, recreational fisherman have been banned from fishing in a number of locally popular rivers (Herz, 2017; Grove, 2018).

Topics of Interest

Arctic National Wildlife Rėfuge (ANWR)

The relationship to natural resources within Alaska is not always consistent. The most recent controversy regarding this issue is the re-emergence of the prospect of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). After years of failed attempts to open up the land

for oil and gas industries, and a high level of visibility in the environmental protection conversation, Congress approved opening up ANWR to oil and gas extraction in 2017, under President Donald Trump. Opponents argue impacts on caribou populations, native populations, and say it does not create sufficient oil supplies with meaningful effects (Aton, 2019). Proponents for drilling, which includes the current Alaskan senator, Lisa Murkowski, say it could decrease America's dependence on foreign fuel and that scientists have developed techniques that will prevent the negative impact on the Alaskan environment (George W. Bush White House Archives, n.d.).

The Arctic and Climate Change

Alaska has become "ground zero" for climate change research (Reiss, 2010). The University of Alaska system, including the University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Alaska Anchorage, and University of Alaska Southeast, carry out significant research on problems specific to the Arctic through the Geophysical Institute, Institute of Marine Science and the Institute of Arctic Biology (Lynch & Miller, 2020; State of Alaska, n.d.).

These institutions provide the country and the world with significant arctic research. Due to its location and variety of biomes, much research is conducted on glaciers, mountains and the arctic tundra, as well as atmospheric and ionospheric conditions, polar oceanography and geophysical aurora research. Around four-fifths of Alaska is underlain by permafrost, providing frontline research on the impacts of melting permafrost on the climate (Lynch & Miller, 2020).

In recent years, scientists have been studying Arctic amplification. This concept, based on observation, shows that global climate change trends tend to be more extreme in the Arctic than in lower regions of the Northern hemisphere and the planet. This has to do with "feedback

between sea ice, snow, water vapor and clouds" (Harriss, 2012, p. 4). Though these concepts may be too broad and obscure to be understood by mass audiences (Harriss, 2012), arctic amplification has brought attention to Alaska in the form of research, media, and awareness.

Alaskans, especially those who practice subsistence lifestyles or who live on the coast of Alaska, are well aware of a warming climate (Ignatowski & Rosales, 2013). On January 24th, 2020, International Arctic Research Center climate scientist, Brian Brettschneider, testified to the Alaskan legislature that, "Climate change is here; greenhouse gas emissions are largely responsible, and Alaska's people and economy are affected" (McFarland, 2020, para 2). Erosion in rural villages is an ongoing challenge which requires not only scientific research to be addressed ethically, but a willingness to incorporate knowledge about the experiences and traditions of native people. Observations by native hunters and gatherers can often be the best data in understanding ecological and environmental changes (Ignatowski & Rosales, 2013).

Although other arctic regions may be more successful in progressing climate change initiatives, the importance of Alaska within America's conversation about climate change cannot be understated. Scholars are asking questions about how interest in climate change can create new pathways. For example, Cambridge professor Mike Hulme, who was formerly a professor of climate change and culture at King's College London studies climate change and media. He poses a positive position on their relationship stating:

> We can use the idea of climate change—the matrix of ecological functions, power relationships, cultural discourses, and material flows that climate change reveals—to rethink how we take forward our political, social, economic, and personal projects over the decades to come (Hulme, 2017, p. 244).

Hulme (2017) also points out that new forms of media may promote more participatory engagement in these conversations, though he does doubt their ability to create great agreement due to their fragmented nature. Harriss (2012) cautions our optimism, reminding us that "environmental histories offer little cause for optimism; knowing our past failures has not prevented us from repeating them" (Harriss, 2012, p. 13). Humanistic factors like tradition, identity and their ability to change will inevitably hold the key to Alaska's future pathway balancing climate change and the interest of Alaskans.

Alaska Native Population

People have inhabited Alaska since 10,000 BCE. As the most ethnically diverse state in the country, the main native populations that live in the state today are the Athabaskans, Aleuts, Inuit, Tlingit and Haida (Lynch & Miller, 2020). A great deal of Native culture is (arguably) still practiced, particularly around rural villages. In some areas, subsistence food makes up more than 50% of their diets. Some of the traditional Native art forms include blanket weaving, wood and ivory carving, beadwork, kayak building and dancing (Lynch & Miller, 2020; State of Alaska, n.d.). Alaska's indigenous inhabitants have faced a difficult journey. One of the first anti-discrimination laws in U.S. history was passed in Alaskan in 1945, laregly due to the efforts of the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) and Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS) and an influencial speech by Alaska civil rights activist Elizabeth Peratrovich. After the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska Native people were given controversial arrangements involving land leasing and land purchasing (Kollin, 2001). Another important issue for Alaska Native people is resource management and subsistence rights. Alaska Native people continue to fight on issues that affect them. In 2015, Mount Denali's name was officially restored from Mount McKinley to

Denali, the Koyukon word, meaning "the high one". Secretary of the Interior at the time, Sally Jewel said the change "recognizes the sacred status of Denali to many Alaska Natives" (Department of Interior, 2015, para 3). This reflects a history of native lands, places, and people being renamed by an immigrant population, whose attempts to claim territory as their own, and ignore what may already be established still greatly impact the Alaska Native population today. Modern cultural problems include loss of culture and language, substance abuse & mental illness, generational trauma and negative social stigmas[1].

Alaska's history shows that it is a place with conflicting values, but a place that seems open having conversations that provide avenues for adaptation. Yet, often the loudest voice is not from within the state. It is the collective voice of those who speak *of* the state.

Visiting the Media's "Last Frontier"

Studies have shown that media induced tourism is a promising way to attract tourists to a destination (Beeton, 2005; Evans, 1997; Riley, Baker, & Doren, 1998). Tourism to New Zealand to visit the "shire" from The Lord of the Rings trilogy is a prime example. The media has the ability to function as a myth-maker, transforming the landscape into the setting of that narrative and embedding meaning into it (Guanxiong, 2013). The landscape thus becomes a place where tourists desire to visit.

But, what is the effect of media on a landscape? Guanxiong (2013) states, "Media narrative plays a pivotal part in reconstructing landscape meanings by normalizing the

[1] The researcher acknowledges an extensive history of Alaska Native related traumas, specifically, in relation to immigrant populations. The intricacies of this history cannot be adequately addressed in this paper.

place-myth into ordinary life" (p 2). Furthermore, *The Tourist Gaze* (Urry, 1990), illustrates the fundamental nature of the tourist's experience and the landscape. The power of the tourist gaze has the ability to transform a landscape with semiotic meaning until it becomes a tourist landscape, itself (Urry, 1990).

Additionally, social actors are another key component for the transformation into a tourist landscape. Beyond simply gazing at the landscape, the actions of the tourists become normalized to perpetuate the narrative that came from the media discourse. In this way, "collective gaze reproduces and reinforces the place-myth" (Guanxiong, 2013, p 4). We may use these theories to apply in the Alaskan tourism industry. The myths that have been formed through a long history of media about the landscape and the lifestyle have created a culture defined by these narratives to the point where they are normalized into everyday life (Guanxiong, 2013).

When it comes to tourist destinations, visitor and resident's experiences build a narrative of the "travel destination" (Chen et al., 2020). In this way, narrative can be understood through French philosopher Paul Ricoeur as "the way humans experience time, in terms of the way we understand our future potentialities, as well as the way we mentally organize our sense of the past" (Barker, 2016, para 5). This narrative may be evaluated and either rejected or accepted by visitors based on the effectiveness of authenticity and self-congruence (Chen, et al., 2020). Chen, et al. (2020) suggests that these factors both directly and indirectly affect visitor recommendation and revisit behaviors.

Tourists develop preconceived notions about the Alaskan identity through concepts regarding themes of untamed beauty, vast wilderness and an unchanging culture and landscape due to the themes presented by both the media and then, the tourism industry. The Alaska Travel

Industry Association's subsidiary website, tourismworksforak.org states on their "industry data" page that "Tourism is a natural resource that can only be developed through marketing. Kollin (2001), who explores Alaskan social history, argues that Alaska has been "fetishized" by nature consumers in order to live out romanticized adventures of discovery. Promotional marketing for the state has presented these ideas to romanticize the state's image (Kollin, 2001, p. 10). The tourism industry has continued to perpetuate these ideologies.

Summer Tourism in Alaska

The word "tourist" first appeared in the late eighteenth century as a synonym for "traveler" (Kollin, 2001, p 36). Tourism has been seen as a negative force, as tourism has the potential to result in wiping away the authenticity and naturalness of landscapes (Kollin, 2001). One of the most famous Alaska enthusiasts, John Muir, who arguably inspired the wave of Alaskan tourism during his lifetime, wrote about the displeasure of seeing the masses. Muir attempted to distance himself from the idea of a tourist, and wrote of his fear of the landscape being overrun with people (Kollin, 2001; Jody, 1969).

The influence of tourism changes as it creeps into more rural areas. Since the Alaskan tourism industry is booming during all seasons, rural communities are becoming increasingly commodified (McKnight et al., 2017). Amenities associated with rural locations, such as outdoor recreation, are progressively becoming marketed and consumed by the global market (McKnight et al., 2017, p. 3).

Tourist activities have a significant role in Alaskan life. Even as locals attempt to distance themselves from the "tourists" (Jody, 1969; Kollin, 2001; Groes, 2019), residents not only participate in many "tourist" activities, but they act as guides and entertainers for the

visitors. According to the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA), tourism is the third largest industry in the state. This translates to one in ten jobs in Alaska being related to the tourism industry (ATIA, 2020).

Growth of the industry

The Alaskan tourism industry has been growing since 2015 (Alaska visitors volume report, 2015). This industry has traditionally been a summer industry as winter months in the state do not permit cruise ships or many of the outdoor activities enjoyed by tourists. However, Fairbanks air travel is up 5% from 2017 to 2018 (ATIA, 2020, p. 3). In 2018, 2 million out-of-state visitors travelled to Alaska with around half from cruise ships, 750,000 through air travel, and around 97,000 as ferry/highway visitors. The volume of visitors from 2018 represents a 27% increase from 2008 (ATIA, 2020, p. 2). Some of the Alaskan tourist growth is attributed to the cruise ship industry, which grew by 7 percent in the last year (ATIA, 2020).

Moreover, the tourism industry generates more than $126 million in state revenues and $88 million in municipal revenues each year through a variety of taxes and other fees. One in three visitors are repeat visitors (ATIA, 2020). In 2018, tourism brought in $1.4 billion for the state.

Winter Tourism in the Arctic as a Growing Market

The Arctic can be a hostile and sparsely populated region (Harriss, 2012). The term "Arctic" in regards to how it is used in the common discourse, can be tied to a groundwork of terms like "remote, wild, primitive and peripheral" (Harriss, 2012, p. 43). This discourse, or "fixation of meaning" (Harriss, 2012, p. 42) revolving around the Arctic tends to be dominated by generalizations defined by discourse in public, research, and political conversations (Harriss,

2012). As the Arctic is one of the few accessible polar regions in the globe, it presents a unique opportunity for visitors to experience the harsh arctic landscape. Experiences in an arctic region may be recently motivated by reports on climate change. The melting of glaciers in these regions have been widely reported on in the media, becoming a global fascination. This has contributed to tourists that want to see the glaciers before they disappear (Harriss, 2012).

While the Arctic may be seen as a single destination, this region is widespread along the northern hemisphere and is made up of countries such as Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Russia and Scandinavia (Runge, et al., 2020). Though these places differ greatly when referring to history, culture, and other humanistic factors, they share many characteristics in common due to the harsh and extreme environment they must survive in. Snow, low temperatures, the midnight sun and the northern lights phenomenon are all shared in the Arctic. These, in part, help to cultivate a shared "particular locality" (Viken, 2012) that assigns the area a kind of identity. Even though the term "Arctic travel" encompasses multiple countries across the globe, data shows a growing interest in an often underrated type of vacation, the Alaskan winter destination. Arctic tourism has risen 500% percent in the last ten years (Runge et al., 2020) with Alaska's ten year volume increase being at 33% (ATIA, 2020). Between 315,000 and 323,000 visitors came to Alaska during the fall/winter months of 2018 (ATIA). Viewing the Aurora Borealis is one of the main attractions for winter travel in the arctic/Interior (Runge et al., 2020).

Often extreme environments breed extreme lifestyles. The arctic is no exception. For many visitors who have only seen this lifestyle through the media, the people, the hardships, and the skills learned to adapt, can be endlessly fascinating.

Summary

If we infer the message that Mcluhan offers us in relation to media portrayals of Alaska, we can begin to understand how each medium changes the way people understand Alaska. The themes of this paper are a collection of our past, through the media. They inform the way we understand our future. The themes presented and the background on the state reveal not only the historical connection, but also the potential and burgeoning "outgrowing" of those themes as definitions of Alaskan culture.

Media's influence and the reality of life in Alaska are important to understand because their relationships reflect a place that yields great power in modern conversation. The tourism industry is a place where these conversations may already be happening and may be the most influential to the rest of the country.

The literature on media's impact on Alaskan visitors and residents is noticeably lacking, especially regarding newer forms of media like reality TV and social media. This study makes connections between the major themes found in media research, interviews with both visitors and residents of Alaska and a content analysis of three popular RT programs about Alaska. One step is to understand the Alaskan media narrative, what environment it creates and how that environment influences tourism, culture and policies within that state. The research allows for an understanding of how interviewees and RT fit into the historical narrative.

Methods

Research Questions

RQ1: What are common perceptions about Alaskan people and culture?

RQ2: How do these perceptions play out in media forms?

RQ3: Do these perceptions affect Alaskan systems: culture, policy, & tourism?

The researcher answered the research questions by utilizing a two-phase study. These qualitative methods consisted of semi-structured, open-ended interviews and media content analysis of RT programs. Methods focused on include the researcher's positional rhetoric, an overview of the media selection process, and the interview recruitment protocol.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis looks at the subjective experience of the researcher and participants. In this study, Qualitative research methods enabled the researcher to understand the lived experiences, perceptions of reality and relationship to media influence of those interviewed beyond the capabilities of quantitative methods. Qualitative methods also provided the framework for developing the understanding of themes directly tied to this subject. The focus on themes generated an ideological methodology consistent with qualitative research methods (Owen, 1984; Barriball, 1994; Cho & Lee, 2014) as well as with the nature of this topic.

Qualitative content analysis can be defined as "a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Ultimately, the term "theme" has evolved alongside growing communications research. Communications scholar William Foster Owen referred to themes as "The building blocks of relationships"(Owen, 1985, p. 2). The researcher finds a current, relevant understanding of themes to be defined as "fundamentally interactive, collaborative and based on exploring and understanding perceptions and experiences" (Nyirenda et al., 2020, p. 2). The analyzation methods utilized for this study

established a framework for understanding complex narratives, opinions, and relationships that make up perceptions surrounding the Alaskan identity. This framework allowed the study to reveal an operational structure around how Alaskan identity is spoken of and how themes from the media filter out through conversation.

Participatory Critical Rhetoric

The researcher is in a unique position as a decade-long Fairbanks resident who, although born in a rural Alaskan community, spent much of her youth outside of the state, returning permanently at age 20. The researcher has worked in multiple facets of tourism, including as an excursion operations manager and salesperson for a dog mushing excursion company in Juneau, Alaska, working almost exclusively with cruise lines. Through these experiences the researcher has interacted with thousands of cruise ship passengers, representatives, and hundreds of tourism industry employees. The researcher also worked as a production assistant on multiple Alaskan RT programs for both National Geographic and the Discovery Channel. These facets of the researcher's experience inform the research, discussion, and background for this project.

The personal experiences of the researcher is of importance as it impacts the methods and tools utilized (Nyirenda et al. 2020). Participatory critical rhetoric places the critic in direct contact with the "audiences" that are witnessing the rhetoric under investigation (Middleton et al., 2017). When a researcher participates in the environment they are studying, they may begin to understand it on a deeper level. This means not only reflecting on these media practices but participating in the structure and production elements the researcher seeks to understand (Middleton et al., 2017, p. 5). The researcher acknowledges the close connection between bias

and experience and took measures to mitigate researcher bias through ethical, scientific and consistent methods.

Phase 1: Media Selection

Non-Fiction/Reality Television

Media materials for content analysis were chosen based on availability and social significance. Netflix and Hulu are currently the most prolific avenues of recorded media consumption, with Netflix claiming approximately 60 million subscribers and Hulu, 28 million (Feiner, 2019). Media on these platforms was chosen based on popularity, critical acclaim and availability.

Moreover, RT is one of the newest, most popular and most influential forms of media (Fu et al., 2016) with studies showing that reality TV influences viewers' perceptions of reality (Parades et al., 2013; Lundy et al., 2008). As there is no clear definition or even industry-standard criteria for determining RT (Nabi et al., 2003), there may be programs that arguably fall in and out of the category. Cavender and Fishman (2018) posited that reality TV consists of programming that "claims to represent reality" (p. 3). Though some may argue that this could include a vast array of programming, such as Law Order and other reality-based TV, Nabi et al. (2003) attempts to establish the following elements of RT:

(a) people portraying themselves (i.e., not actors or public figures performing roles)

(b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set

(c) without a script,

(d) with events placed in a narrative context

(e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment. (Nabi et al., 2003,)

The three shows that were analyzed for this content analysis included: *Life Below Zero* season one, air date of 2013, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* season four, which aired in 2015, and *Alaskan Bush People* season two, airing in 2014. All episodes were the season premiere episode.

Life Below Zero has won five Emmys, including "Outstanding Cinematography for a Reality Program" and has been nominated for nine Emmys, including "Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program" (Television Academy, n.d.). All three programs had an audience base of more than 1 million viewers during the time period analyzed, with *Alaskan Bush People* frequently holding the highest number of viewers (over 3 million) of any show on nights that it aired in 2014 (Tribune Media Entertainment, 2020). The researcher selected seasons premiers for analysis as they appeared to have the most viewers (Tribune Media Entertainment, 2020). *Alaska: The Last Frontier* premiered season three in 2014 with a record high of 2.38 million viewers.

This time period is significant as each of the seasons took place during the years of 2013-2015, when viewership was the highest (Tribune Media Entertainment, 2020). This consistency promoted saturation in the media samples collected.

Following 2014, the viewer base for Alaska RT began to decrease (Tribune Media Entertainment, 2020). Selecting these programs during the peak of their popularity allowed the researcher to analyze episodes that reached the largest number of viewers.

Phase 2: Interview

Inclusion Criteria

The researcher established two interview groups: Resident and Non-Resident. These participants are referred to under these terms throughout the paper and should be noted, are

distinct. In order to participate in this study, participants had to speak fluent English and be over the age of 18. To qualify as an Alaskan Resident interviewee, participants were required to have lived in the state for over one year. Duration of residency was not specified in inclusion criteria and covered a broad range. To qualify as a Non-Resident interviewee, people could not currently or have ever lived in Alaska. They were, however, required to live in the United States or Canada. Visitors could have previously visited and the length of their current stay did not impact their ability to qualify for the study. The researcher did not pre-screen any interviewees with questions about media consumption or perceptions about Alaska.

Recruitment

Participants for the interviews were recruited both in-person and through the use of social networking. For in-person for interviews, the researcher picked locations around Fairbanks based on the highest perceived frequency of visitors. The locations chosen for recruitment included the University of Alaska Museum of the North, the Morris Thompson Cultural & Visitors Center, and the Springhill Suites hotel lobby. The most recently published annual report for the Museum of the North states their annual attendance at 86,960 visitors (Annual Report, 2015). To put this figure into perspective, the estimated arrival and destination numbers of Fairbanks hit approximately 1 million people in 2015 (Klouda, 2017). The Morris Thompson Cultural & Visitors Center is ranked #3 out of 56 things to do in Fairbanks on the travel website TripAdvisor (TripAdvisor, 2020). Similarly, Springhill Suites is rated #5 out of 27 hotels in Fairbanks on TripAdvisor (Tripadvisor, 2020).

Participants were recruited based on availability. Residents were also recruited in these settings through employees. At both the Museum of the North and the Morris Thompson Visitor

and Cultural Center, employees were interviewed as Residents. Additionally, the researcher utilized her personal social networks to seek participants that were Alaskan Residents.

Instrument

Interview data was collected using semi-structured, open-ended interviews. These interviews consisted of a tri-level consent form and open-ended interview questions. The researcher approached potential participants in each location, explained the study, as well as time requirements. If the individual was interested in continuing with the study, they were presented with a consent form to review.

The consent form consisted of three tiers for participants to select (Appendix C). One, two, or all three of the options could be selected. The first box provided consent for the interview and written answers to questions. The second box provided consent for audio recording the subsequent interview, to then be destroyed upon transcription. The third box consented to both levels one and two, as well as consented to allowing the researcher to record on an external recording device and store the audio interview file until the completion of the graduate thesis project. Furthermore, this tier provided full access and permission to include the interview audio in potential broadcasts which may include identifiable information (such as first name and voice). Upon reading this information the participants could check the box for any or all levels of consent they felt comfortable with.

After the consent forms were completed, if given permission, the researcher would begin recording. If the researcher was not given permission to record, the researcher would conduct the interview while taking notes in a notebook for later transcription. The researcher asked the participants questions from one of two interview scripts, depending on residency (Appendix A &

B). Questions were asked in the same wording throughout interviews to ensure differences in answers could be contributed to differences in participants rather than in the questions asked (Barribal, 1994). The questions aimed at uncovering specific and conjoined variables for Residents vs for Non-Residents. These variables encompassed the overarching themes of the research questions.

To begin the interview, the researcher began with rapport building questions. Some of these initial questions were designed to address variables such as demographics, home life, experiences/perceptions of visiting or living in Alaska. The next section included questions regarding their relationship to media representations of Alaska, experiences communicating with locals or visitors, relationships to RT specifically, and perceptions of media influence. Participants were explicitly asked about any understanding or opinions of the three television shows that were analyzed by the researcher. The researcher concluded all interviews by asking the participant if they had anything else they would like to share with the researcher.

Data Analysis

Phase 1: Media Content

To analyze the media samples collected, the researcher used qualitative content analysis with the intended goal of identifying emotional, narrative and social themes. Themes can be defined as "a way to describe a structural unit of meaning essential to present qualitative results" (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 6). Each episode was watched by the researcher a total of three times. First- as a passive viewing, second- to develop general structure around emerging themes and third- to record data to organize into themes.

In the content analysis, the researcher utilized a deductive approach to the themes, rather than an inductive approach. This deductive approach was based on previous knowledge regarding Alaskan reality television and themes typically utilized by the programs (Cho & Lee, 2014). Preexisting codes and categories were derived from literature research, personal experience as an Alaskan resident and professional involvement as a production assistant. This type of content analysis and ultimately the concepts drawn from the analysis provide a possible framework for our understanding of "social reality" (Cho & Lee, 2014).

The researcher also utilized Grounded Theory for content collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). One of the most commonly used theories in qualitative research (Ruppel & Mey, 2015), Grounded Theory enables the researcher to code for themes while collecting data for content analysis. Collection procedures acknowledge that "experiencing and meaning-making itself is embedded in unfolding narratives and can take place in a storied format" (Ruppel & Mey, 2015, p. 2).

After quotes were collected, they were categorized using an open-coding system. First, the number of times each word was used was recorded. They were then compared to each other using axial coding and further conglomerated into larger groups of themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Finally, the number of words within a certain category were recorded to signify how often each of the themes occurred. Each show's individual themes were then collected and further placed into larger groupings that created combined categories from all three shows.

Phase 2: Interviews

After completing the interviews, the audio recordings of the interviews were automatically transcribed using the program Otter.AI. Following transcription, the researcher

was able to begin the coding process. The transcripts were coded using an open-coding system to evaluate participant's responses and axial coding to draw conclusions about the relationships between interviewee's perceptions and the research questions proposed by the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

The researcher listened to each interview three times. First - without notes. Second - to highlight answers that stood out in relation to the study's focus and Third - to select relevant responses from each question and input into an Excel spreadsheet for categorization and comparison. Interviews were input into one of two spreadsheets; Resident and Non-Resident. These two spreadsheets were then compared to identify similarities and differences in perceptions, and later expanded into broader themes about relationships between the groups and the research questions.

Results

RQ1: What are common perceptions about Alaskan people and culture?

RQ2: How do these perceptions play out in media forms?

RQ3: Do these perceptions affect Alaskan culture, identity, policy, & tourism?

Content Analysis

Reinforcing Language

Data collection from the selected programs was focused on the language used throughout the episodes. All programs were shot in a natural setting, showing scenes of hunting and family life, and plots were centered around challenges/tasks. These scenes can be expected as tropes of

Alaskan RT programs. The researcher chose to code the language of the cast and voice-overs to explore her research questions. In addition to language, the soundtrack, style, and editing provided additional content for discussion and contributed to the overarching themes.

The most prevalent topics were:

- Danger
- Survival
- Weather
- Urgency
- Overcoming challenges & tasks
- Belonging
- Nature

In order to distill these specific topics, program language was first broken down by individual words. For example, if a character's line was, "Out here, only the tough survive", the researcher would record the terms "tough" and "survive". If the word "survive" was used more than once, the researcher would record how many times. Additionally, words with similar root words were combined. For example, "danger" and "dangerous" were both counted as "danger".

When topics began to emerge, language was further defined. For example, "Emergency", "critical" and "worry" were grouped together into the theme of "danger" . As the researcher recorded phrases, main themes began to emerge through the use of repeated words and ideas. Moreover, the episode storylines were consistently tied to one of the larger themes. As such, the characters' word choices seemed specifically chosen to further reinforce the theme. For example, iterations of the word "Danger" were the most spoken words in all three of the programs. In

Alaska: The Last Frontier, it was mentioned 29 times during a 42-minute episode. This averaged out to a reference to "danger" every 1.4 minutes.

Relating to Established Themes

The thematic dialogue in the RT programs supports the major themes identified in the literature review of this paper. RT language perpetuated and reinforced the historical representations of Alaska in the media. Previous media has attempted to create characters, scenarios, and lifestyles that act as characters in larger narratives, whether these narratives be true or exaggerated.

Alaskan RT portrayed the same themes found in other forms of mass media such as:

- uniquely tough
- the last frontier
- conquering mentality
- vast emptiness

Uniquely tough. The characters in the programs struggle through dangerous tasks and situations because it reinforces the idea that Alaskans are "uniquely tough". The characters speak consistently about how "unique" they are, juxtaposing themselves against the concept of normality, positioning themselves as "chosen" for this lifestyle. "We were born to be here. There's no other place for me." (*Alaskan Bush People*), "There's no school you can go to or training you can take to come live out here and do things like this" (*Life Below Zero*). These types of statements imply that the characters are special, or in fact that they possess an unlearnable trait that makes them "Alaskan". The sense of belonging that is used as a theme in these programs creates a narrative about the uniqueness of Alaskans. As such, the concept of a

family unit is an important focus across all the programs. They are a clan, or a breed all their own. It subtly asserts that this kind of "craziness" is somehow hereditary and less of a choice.

The Last Frontier. Throughout the programs, the environment is portrayed as a dangerous place. This is not justified only by traditional environmental factors (animals and weather), but reaches to include modern cultural abnormalities. It's "kind of like the wild west" (*Alaska Bush People*). Characters often compare themselves to traditional adventurers such as John Wayne or even pirates. This evokes romanticised images of adventure and lawlessness. "There's no law. There's nobody that's going to protect you." (*Alaskan Bush People*), is uttered by a character as he attempts to enter a bar in Chitina, Alaska to ask about lumber. Additionally, in all the programs, the environment is held up as different from that of the rest of the world with recurring dialogue like, "There is no other true wilderness left but right here in the arctic of Alaska. That's it" (Life Below Zero).

Nostalgia for times when the state symbolized "The Last Frontier" is a recurring theme of the programs. When the family in *Alaskan Bush People* reach their newly purchased plot of land "in the middle of the wilderness", they build a plastic-wrapped shelter, held up by trees and duct tape. This tent is referred to by the narrator as a "primitive shack". It's used as a comparison to shelters constructed by gold miners during the Gold Rush dubbed, "Trapper shacks". In between shots, the show cuts to historical photographs of 19th century trapper shacks with gold miners standing next to them.

In *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, they utilize similar techniques to generate nostalgia in the audience. The show cuts to (assumed) family footage of the character's father working on the homestead. The modern character's voice is overlayed on top of the archival footage, speaking

about the "old days". The characters are portrayed like they are explorers on the edge of civilization, taming nature, seeking glory and battling at "the front lines of wilderness". When Sue Aikens from *Life Below Zero* looks into the camera, covered in ice and sternly states, "I am the last frontier", these implications are clear.

A Conquering Mentality. In *Life Below Zero*, the themes of survival and making one's way in life are center stage. A lone white character, Erik Salitan, stalks off alone into the snow, shoots a caribou and harvests the carcass. He tells us, "Every bit of meat I eat is harvested by me". The show plays this audio clip on two separate occasions, a common technique for RT when a certain sound bite carries the appropriate effect with strength . This combination of language and action successfully reinforces the idea that the character embodies the frontiersman identity. On the recurring topic of why he loves his life and Alaska, he asserts that "being free means being able to carve out a life on your own terms".

Another interesting character in *Life Below Zero* is Chip Hailstone, a white man married to an Inupiaq woman, who throughout the show, serves as a voice for her traditions. He, however, never asserts frontiersman qualities. In fact, his dialogue often seems to contrast the frontiersman ideology. He speaks of subsistence practices as "wealth without money" and calls money "dangerous". During the episode he and his extended family fish for whitefish on a frozen lake. His point of view is all about providing for his family and the importance of the family unit. He references his position as an outsider only once, "I love this place because the people won't give me any trouble. They look at me and what I do and they always honor a provider. That's all that matters to them". This character and his storyline show a juxtaposition between the values of Alaska Native communities and American ideals. It should be noted that instead of an Alaskan

Native telling the story, there is a white male telling it. A White American Man as the voice of an Alaska Native community references a complex, historical trauma of assimilation and disregarding the Alaska Native Population and their voices (Bunton, 2015). It perpetuates a conquering mentality by framing the white male immigrant as the protagonist and thus, as the hero.

A Vast Emptiness. "My address is a GPS coordinate", Sue Aikens tells us in *Life Below Zero*. As the caretaker for a remote camp just south of Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, she is the most isolated of all the characters on *Life Below Zero*. Aikens is well-spoken and fond of one-liners, "My closest neighbor might be a bear right outside that door". Her storyline perpetuates the theme of a vast, empty wilderness. "I live at the top of nowhere", she states proudly at one point.

Andy Bassich's (Another character from *Life Below Zero)* main storyline portrays him attempting to take his dog team across the river to town in the early stages of winter. He tells the audience, "We don't have roads in Alaska. Most of the rivers are the highways for people". This perpetuates an unrealistic generalization about Alaska as a whole. Though undoubtedly, there are thousands of people in rural villages around the state that utilize river travel, statistically the large majority of Alaskans drive on paved roads. The concept of isolation plays into this theme. All of the characters are portrayed as living "beyond the end of the road", leading isolated lives and explicitly referencing it, like, "I love the isolation." (*Life Below Zero*). This repetition creates a stereotype that that is how all Alaskans live, therefore theoretically implying that Alaska is empty.

The intro for *Alaskan Bush People* makes dramatic work of this concept, as the father Billy ferociously spouts, "We're not from a different country, we're not from a different state.

It's a different planet". Statements like these remove any sense of Alaska's bustling economy, metropolitan areas and instead isolate the Alaskan landscape from modern America.

Stuck in the past. A main enabler to the frontiersman identity is the idea that Alaska is somehow stuck in the past. No programs reference this theme as explicitly as *Alaskan Bush People*, who ask the director at one point, "What's an iphone?". They reject the modern world, in favor of living life "in the bush". They call themselves pirates and "old fashioned mountain men". This, however, does not depict reality as. During the episode, the family is living in Ketchikan, a populated, tourist town, working regular jobs. The narrator seems determined to distance the Brown family from modern America, saying that even though they may look normal, the "recently discovered" family is "unlike any family in America". The episode purposefully takes place in the woods, as the family attempts to celebrate Christmas "their own way".

As far as their lifestyle goes, there are constant references to how little they bathe, as well as their "traditional diet". The narrator explains how even when the family does have to go to the store to "supplement" their usually wild diet, they can feed the entire family of nine with just two trips in a month. These comparisons are meant to show they are not operating on the expectations of modern American consumerist culture. Their reliance on repeating the same words throughout the episode establishes a fictional world that does not exist outside of RT formulated language. Yet, is portrayed as reality.

Interviews

Through the interviews with both Residents and Non-Residents, the researcher was able to find common themes relating to people's expectations of Alaska. The researcher identified four main themes among Alaskan Residents: lifestyle, visitors, media and being Alaskan. Additionally, the researcher identified three main themes among Visitors to Alaska: perceptions about the culture, media, and Alaskans. The small number of interviews (13) analyzed by the researcher requires that their indications be understood as limited. Interviews in relation to this study are supplemental to the other forms of analysis and provide a small window in which one can observe the potential findings that may emerge if one were to conduct a more complete, representative study. Nonetheless, the interviews in this study were essential in testing out the theories and how they may function in public discourse.

Alaskan Residents

Five Residents were interviewed. The demographics of the participants varied. Two women and three men were interviewed. One female identified herself as an Alaska Native. The other four participants identified as white. The ages of participants ranged from 24 to 68 years of age. The three male participants were first-generation Alaskan Residents, having moved to the state from the continental United States as adults. One female was a second-generation Alaskan Resident and one female was indigenous to the Alaskan region. Four of the participants resided in Fairbanks and one participant resided in Juneau, Alaska.

Lifestyle. Alaskan Residents all compared their daily lives to the rest of the country, saying things like, "my life is about the same as anyone else in the lower 48" or "normal...not interesting". For example, Residents pointed out that urban areas were not very isolated and that community, much like anywhere else, is agreed upon as an important part of the Alaskan life. Interestingly, most Residents didn't believe life in Alaska to be very dangerous. It was only the RT producer who felt that Alaska was especially dangerous. One Resident specifically referenced living in Alaska as being safer than living in big cities.

While Residents felt like life in Alaska was comparable to the lower 48, they did identify some differences. For example, participants mentioned that the weather was the most significant and challenging part of Residents' lives. They mentioned that some of the most difficult parts of their lifestyle was the lack of sunlight in the interior winters. Additionally, staying indoors during colder months, the high rate of suicides during winter, and the general unpredictability of weather were also listed as differentiators for the Alaskan lifestyle. Everyone also agreed that Alaska is somewhat isolated. While there are bustling cities in Alaska, and most people live modern lifestyles, as one person mentioned, if you were to "get off the road, it's like a third world country".

Tourism. When it comes to visitors, Residents say they are generally happy to welcome them into the community, "It's everyday life". One Resident spoke openly about the role of tourism in the economy:

> A lot of Alaskans realize that the oil industry is in decline. And so we have to get our money either from extracting resources or tourism or from fishing. And so if you open up to tourism, it's the least damaging of all of those three, so a lot of people are embracing tourism.

Residents all spoke positively about tourists and tourism in the state. One resident, who worked in tourism in Juneau joked about how to recognize a tourist in Juneau, one of the rainiest places in America, "They carry an umbrella". Residents tend to wear rain gear, if anything at all. The resident also mentioned they typically have stereotypical images of Alaskan life, "Dog Sledding, igloos, ice everywhere...crab fisherman everywhere like in Deadliest Catch". Overall, tourism and interacting with tourists is just part of life in Alaska. Residents all agree that tourists have many misconceptions about the state and residents shared a playful amusement about all the unrealistic conceptions. If anything, this distancing from tourist's misconceptions seems to bond residents together, and can be identified as an "us vs. them" mentality, prevalent in a strong sense of regional identity.

Communication with Visitors. Residents admitted that they communicate differently about their life to tourists than they do with other Residents. Types of things one might talk about with tourists may be "potential" experiences or one may romanticize or fantasize scenarios with the visitor. Another difference mentioned was the use of stereotypical information when speaking to a tourist and not with a local and an ability to use "shorthand" with residents in a way that one cannot with visitors.

Misconceptions. Everyone agreed that tourists had misconceptions about Alaska. Common misconceptions listed related to the amount of darkness year-round, seeing the Aurora Borealis in the summer months, the frequency of seeing wild animals and misinformation about Alaska native lifestyles. Common visitor inaccuracies involved the most common Alaskan symbols such as igloos and dog-sledding. One Resident, who works at one of the visitor centers, describes misconceptions about Alaska natives, "They expect...that the natives are more

primitive than they really are. They expect them to be in the Stone Age, live in an igloo." Another Resident described the belief that Alaskans are a "certain type of person", described as "tough", or "having grit". The Resident went on to assert that the visitors aren't wrong to assume this and agreed that "true Alaskans are a little more rough around the edges and can handle more intensity." Another Resident expressed her desire that the visitors do "better research" before coming, due to the high cost of traveling to the state.

Media. Many Residents chalked up the misconceptions of tourists to some form of media as the main source of misinformation, specifically, the "millions of TV shows". All the Residents had some type of relationship with Alaska RT. Some regularly watched the programs, one Resident was related to characters from *Yukon Men*. Residents shared a general disgruntlement when the topic of Alaskan representation in the media came up.

The RT show that showed the most individuality and was the most widely recognized by interviewees was *Alaskan Bush People*. Some participants did not remember until the name was mentioned but all Resident and Non-Resident participants were familiar with the show. This may be due to the fact that the personality of the characters were converted into themes. Producers turned characters into easily identifiable stereotypes that aligned with the core "Alaskan" themes, instead of using action or the setting to establish themes. As such, the dialogue and the crafted personalities did the work. Arguably, this connection to the characters enabled higher retention of both viewership and recall ability of show content.

The most significant influence on a Resident was the RT producer, who moved to the state from Los Angeles. The Resident has transitioned away from the genre in recent months. He described a transition out of RT as the industry has "slowed" and is now working in adventure

"logistics and coordination", as well as volunteering at a local fire department. This participant used rhetoric that distanced himself from the genre. It was made clear to the researcher that the producer understood the backlash from Residents and agreed with the sentiment. It was also stated that his career in film was moving in a more "educational" direction. He explained that he was currently working on a show for the BBC which was "less cheesy".

As expected, Residents held strong opinions about Alaska in the media, though none had any negative opinions on any other form of media than RT. The content in RT is agreed upon as being more dramatic, exciting, extreme than real life. One Resident spoke about the media's perpetuation of a conquering mentality theme, "There is a presentation of aggressiveness and resource extraction to the point that [it] [en]dangers the environment and wildlife. That's not the case. Alaskans are concerned about the environment."

Being Alaskan. What makes someone Alaskan is a general "toughness". Not complaining, having a sense of pride, being more adventurous than the average person. One Resident equated this adventurousness to the common denominator of a growing population of immigrants, "I think that's because there are a lot of immigrants. Immigrants are people that are seeking adventure."

However, being an Alaskan means different things to different people. To some, it means being willing to be removed from family in the continental U.S. For others it means preserving their traditional culture. What was clear is that Residents were not confused by the question. They were ready with an answer.

Non-Residents

All Non-Residents were Americans from the continental U.S. One-third were repeat visitors while the rest were on their first visit to the state. Four participants were female and three were male. Ages ranged from 24 to 65 years of age. All were on short visits from the continental United States and identified as tourists. More than half listed their reason for visiting was to see the Northern Lights. A first-time visitor from Los Angeles remarked openly, "The only reason I'm here is because of Northern Lights photos on Instagram." Two Non-Residents had been to Alaska two other times on cruise ships and the remaining participants were first-time visitors to the state.

Perceptions. When asked about their perceptions before visiting the state, commonality in themes from this paper emerged. One visitor described the state as "primitive, historic, beautiful, nature in its purest form and beautiful animals". Another visitor joked about her misconceptions, saying before she came to the state, she would have described it as, "Polar bears, salmon, national parks and other geographic features". All Non-Residents agreed that their initial perceptions about Alaska had changed since spending time in the state. Many simply said that upon arriving, they had no idea what to expect. The weather, the friendliness of the people, the modernness, the diversity, and the culture were all surprising factors for Non-Residents.

Some expected more Alaska native people, while others said the urban feel and "socioeconomic factors" of Anchorage were shocking. For example, one participant stated, "We didn't realize there was such a large homeless population". These Non-Residents described their expectations of Anchorage stating that they thought it would resemble other mountain resort towns, like Aspen. Other Non-Residents said the presence of box stores and vegan restaurants in Fairbanks was a surprise. The Non-Residents, upon spending time in Alaska, described life as being not that much different than in the lower 48.

Media. For those who watched RT, the motivations for watching included learning about the environment, learning new skills and learning how people here live. "It just looks cool" was another reason for watching Alaska RT. Two Non-Residents who identified as RT viewers stated that they did not believe the programs were inauthentic. They asked the researcher if "the shows are really fake". These participants gave answers that aligned with the themes perpetuated in the media. Even after visiting the state more than three times, one Non-Resident described life in Alaska as "very dangerous" (emphasis on very) and repeatedly used phrases like "primitive, natural, historic" and "pure". They were more likely to believe there was a sense of "urgency" to life in Alaska, a theme identified in the RT analysis. They also didn't think they could live in Alaska because they weren't tough enough and believed that Alaskans always needed to be ready for anything and never able to "lollygag" around.

An important indication that stood out to the researcher were differences between non-residents who use social media (new media) and non-residents who do not. Varying responses on the limited participants indicated differences between the two groups of non-residents. Due to the small number of participants and the focus of the study, further research will need to be done in understanding these differences. But, the researcher did take note and her findings suggest that understanding these differences may be key in managing Alaska's image moving forward.

Communication with Alaskans. None of the Non-Residents believed their experience affected their communication with locals. Some were quick to add that they try not to generalize as if contrasting their media influence to their individuality. They all agreed that community plays an important role in the lives of Alaskans and that the state is very isolated. They all asserted that they had been having conversations with locals, with one group describing Alaskans as "very chatty". Other descriptions of Alaskans all centered around themes of resilience, being outdoorsy, toughness and self-reliance. Older populations were more likely to engage in long-form conversations with locals. Younger participants were more likely to learn in other ways.

Discussion

The researcher found many rhetorical similarities between the literature, content analysis, and interview dialogues. Non-Residents, TV characters, authors, journalists, and residents tended to participate in the same rhetorical discourse ("primitive, natural, wild, huge, empty, tough, unique, etc.") when describing Alaska. It is this type of rhetorical discourse, noticed by the researcher that cultivates the proposed Alaskan themes. The results support the concept of Cultivation Theory in regards to Alaska's portrayal in the media.

Through content analysis, the researcher found that the genre of Alaskan RT creates unique communication about Alaskan identity. This unique identity was created by exacerbating stereotypes and expectations which has increasingly misrepresented the state and its residents. This particular medium had unique and dramatic effects on Alaskan image. Analyzing the medium's "message", the researcher was able to easily identify cultivated themes about Alaska in action. Due to the nature of the medium, analyzing the "background" described by McLuhan

revealed not only the content of the programs, but of the perceived motivations of the content creators as well as the real-world effect on Residents and Non-Residents. The strong reactions to the medium provided measurable qualitative data on how these themes influence people.

A unique effect was that RT ignited a strong backlash from residents about how they were being represented and created communication opportunities for residents to reflect on the nature of the themes portrayed in the programs. The researcher argues that the insufficiencies of this medium and its negative impacts may be positively addressed in the new medium of social media.

The researcher cross-referenced the literature, media, and interviews. All collected data reinforced the assumption that pervasive images of Alaska and Alaskans do exist. The results support McLuhan's argument that each medium has its own inherent bias and that the differences between each medium can show us how communication evolves.

This project showcases Alaska's policy history in regards to oil, wilderness & resources, tourism and Alaska Native issues. The researcher believes that this history is intertwined with the themes presented in this paper. They affect each other simultaneously. These narratives continue to evolve through different forms of media. Each medium changes the shape of Alaskan identity, not only because of the content but because of the way the medium alters communication and the way we see the world (Smith, 2017). Furthermore, the researcher identified that these images of Alaska and Alaskans have and will continue to have an influence on residents and non-resident visitors. Moreover, the significance of these inaccurate tropes is argued to have negative impacts on the state. The researcher believes the themes identified negatively impact the ability of the

state to manage natural resources, stabilize a troubled economy, mitigate and respond to consequences from climate change, and navigate Alaska Native issues.

Tourism

The Alaskan tourism industry is a stable market and is not going away. From tourists inspired by John Muir's descriptions of glaciers to pilgrims seeking out the magic bus, there will continue to be a desire to see Alaska. Yet, the tourism industry has become accustomed to perpetuating inconsistent and insincere experiences, still relying on the "patterns" set by Jack London and Robert Service. It undermines the potential for authentic experiences by largely relying on stereotypical and outdated thematic encounters. Tourists see the Alaskan landscape through the lens of their guides. But, often tourists see what they want to see, or what they already believe to be true. A Non-Resident may be less likely to notice or remember changes in animal habitat, political and economic problems and human hardships if they do not align with their values, beliefs, and ideas. People learn through example and by imitating others (Bandura, 1977).

Tourists imitate other tourists. Residents imitate other residents. The tourism industry is in a repetitive cycle of repetition and reinforcement and what people learn about the state is inevitably influenced by what people before them learn. So one cannot expect the tourists to change. It is the industry that must present a different model. Future negative consequences that may motivate change within this industry are the truths that inauthenticity will limit future growth and that disappointed visitors have the power to leave negative reviews which may create a decline in tourism.

Real Life and RT Collide

Overall, the disconnect between what RT programs portray to audiences and what goes on behind the scenes is most evident in the legal situation regarding the cast of *Alaskan Bush People.* In 2016, the family was charged with lying about their Alaskan residency on the permanent fund dividend (PFD) applications. The father, Billy Brown and one of his sons, Bam Bam Brown pleaded guilty. During the time the family said they were living in Alaska, they were actually residing in Texas and Colorado. The family, who have said they would die if they couldn't live in the bush, were given probation, forced to do community service and forced to pay more than $10,000 back to the state (Hanlon, 2016). A Resident who lives in Southeast Alaska, where the show was filmed, had this to say:

> There's a lot of controversy with *Alaskan Bush People*. Most Alaskans roll their eyes at those people because they pretend to be from here but they aren't actually from here. They make a big deal out of doing stuff that wouldn't be a big deal.

This sentiment is shared among many Alaskans. Every Alaskan interviewed spoke of the cast and crew of the show in negative terms. The deeper irony of the situation is in the connection between the portrayed disassociation between the Brown family, modern-day America and "the system". The idea that they were illegally falsifying their Alaskan identity in order to receive money from the federal government is a storyline stranger than fiction.

Another disconnect between RT portrayal and reality is the location of the (*Alaska: The Last Frontier*) Kilcher family farm. This show has been ridiculed for being "overproduced" (Fehrenbacher, 2016). For example, known by residents to be only 12 miles, or 20 minutes (Kanter, 2018) from the contemporary town, Homer, the show strongly pushes the perception that the farm is "in the middle of nowhere".

Whether it be finding food or shelter, completing a project before winter or battling the natural world in some way, the emotional tone of these programs portrays the characters' lives in an unrealistic capacity. Oftentimes the characters were not actually in any obvious "danger" but seemingly enacted an overproduced scripted storyline. They may be asked particular questions to evoke certain responses. Their statements may be used out of context. Music may heighten the desired tone of the scene. Often, scenarios with a mild level of one of the many themes (e.g. uniquely tough, danger, pioneer life) are dramatized by the use of out of context footage, voice-overs, and music to heighten the emotion or scripted narrative of the scene.

We see by the example of Chris McCandless' narrative how beloved stories have the ability to discount unpleasant realities. We also see through this example the influence the media still has on Alaska tourism in young generations. The particular trouble caused by *Into the Wild* is worth studying as social media brings opportunity for pilgrims to share in the narrative.

Interest in the state and its ability to function as metaphor or emotional landscape is as strong as ever. We see this in the recent box office success of a new *Call of the Wild* adaptation. The established success of Alaska as a subject of interest may not last forever. The increasingly pervasive "global village" will possibly degrade the power of Alaskan identity. One can look at The Wild West as a model for this journey.

All Running Together

The discrepancy between what the media shows and actual life in Alaska is measurable. The particular "regional identity" perpetuated by the themes creates a "place image" (Stylidis, 2018) which reality will not be able to live up to. Because of the isolation of the state, the media is increasingly relied upon to share information. The mystery that the isolation generates has

been commodified and capitalized on by mass media looking to entertain. Networks like Discovery Channel and National Geographic have used Alaskans to tell narratives that align with the interests of the networks, not Alaskans. The effects of the Alaska Film Tax Credit may be seen as positive in the creation of "place attachment" (Fu, Ye & Xiang, 2016) and tourism. But Alaskans must ask themselves, at what cost.

A recurring issue that arose during interviews was the inability for participants to accurately recall which programs they watched or any details about the individual programs. For some, what they remember are particular scenes, like a lone man hunting in the woods, which can describe a number of programs. The individuality of the programs were less reliable than initially anticipated. Of significance, is the idea that the themes and narratives are overarching throughout the media as opposed to individual programs. These themes are so pervasive and relied upon, that the repetition blurs them together for the audience. The audience does not remember the specific RT show, they remember the themes. One of the Alaskan Residents interviewed pondered, "The reality shows all start to run together after a while. There are so many."

Impact of Data

The major consequences of narrative reinforced by media occur when preconceived notions and mental schema don't equate to lived experiences. This discrepancy can leave people feeling unheard and even misrepresented. For example, the reality show *Jersey Shore* (2009) gave rise to a tidal wave of place popularity (Margaritoff, 2018), however, ultimately, the themes presented in the show did not accurately reflect reality and created backlash from residents in the area (Pilkington, 2010; "Jersey Shore", 2010). Within a span of about five years, the public

discourse about the show and place dropped out of the mainstream conversation, or "global village" (McLuhan, 1964). This bell-shaped curve of interest is similar to the one experienced in Alaska RT. It is also another example of how this form of media can create backlash, caused by residents who believe they are being inauthentically portrayed. This is also key to understanding how RT affected Alaska.

In summary, the traditional narratives remove the ability and the right of Alaskan residents to see their state with clarity. If they are constantly being told that resources are abundant, when in fact, they are becoming depleted, they will not feel the pressure to take action to protect and reinvigorate their natural resources. If Alaskans are being told that their land is empty, they will be more likely to treat it as inanimate. If Alaskans are told they live in the past, they will not feel ready to take advantage of new technology that can better their lives and especially, the environment. Alaskans have been living out actions and rhetoric that align with overarching, implicit and reoccurring themes, thus furthering their reality. The Arctic needs attention, and if we are wearing the lenses of inauthentic narratives, we will continue to live in a place of contradiction and continue to wear the constraining costume of values we have outgrown.

What may keep Alaska relevant in a globalized world is its position in conversations around climate change. It is in a unique position in the country. Alaska has much power in how the rest of the country may begin to hear about and see a changing climate. As the growth of winter tourism shows us, people are interested now, more than ever in the arctic environment. It is this environment that is revealing a changing climate.

Findings That Indicate Future Research

Taking Back Alaska

Social media and Alaska

Social media has dramatically changed the tourism industry in Alaska and will continue to do so. Old forms of mass media are becoming less significant to culture. Advertisers have been transitioning away from traditional mass media and into online media over the last few years (Cha, 2013). Playing an active role on social media is becoming essential for modern businesses and tourism industries. Visitors of the younger generations may be less willing to accept the messages delivered through mediums of the past and therefore less willing to engage with them. The visitors whose travel was influenced by Instagram posts were consistently younger than those who watch RT. They were less likely to repeat rhetoric that supported the themes presented and had a more critical take on Alaskan culture. They were the only Non-Resident group who described Alaska as not very dangerous or even as less dangerous than where they come from, equating danger not to images of bear attacks and running out of food, but to realistic components like traffic-related deaths and crime.

People naturally have expectations, often influenced by the specific forms of media one engages with. Those who engage with social media have different expectations than visitors of the past. Social media may come to be essential for ethically engaging with visitors and their expectations in real time. The immediate nature of this medium can create an information feedback loop and in turn, take a visitor's experience from passive to active. Active participation may open the door to more meaningful experiences.

For those with the goal of reaching modern audiences, visitors who are innovators in social media should be taken seriously, embraced and given platforms. Not engaging with the new medium will result in inability to connect and truly engage the new type of visitor.

This evolution in communication is specifically difficult within the Alaskan Culture. Themes of living in the past are strong in the Alaskan ethos. In a era of video rental's rapid decline, Alaska was the proud home to two of the world's final Blockbuster stores. Travel and Leisure dubbed Anchorage Alaska, "The worst dressed city in America". It can be argued that the Alaskan population, especially in rural areas, fall into the "laggard" group in the Diffusion of Innovations theory by Everett Rogers, meaning they are typically the last group to adopt, if ever, new innovative technology (Rogers, 2003). While necessary, the transition to a new media may prove difficult for Alaskans who fall into this category.

Yet, for it's innate claim of authenticity, social media is far from immune to the pressures of putting one's "best face forward". One Resident interviewed admitted to posting content on her social media that showcased a "romanticized" image of the state. She explained that she is less likely to post the "day to day" activities and more likely to post content that showcased the "Alaska experience". She explained that her social media was often the only way she could share her life in Alaska with friends in "the lower 48". This meant that she put heavy emphasis on what she posted. She went on to include that she is motivated by a desire for her friends who live outside of Alaska to want to come visit and this was the way she enticed them to do so. This participant is an example of successful strategic utilization of social media by residents and the understanding that media holds significance in what the rest of the world understands and sees about the state.

Ultimately, indications are not limited to social media itself. One can imagine other forms of individual voice empowerment. The emphasis on social media may be seen as a region of focus in which the particular strengths of the medium may be understood and these strengths can be translated into alternative engagement.

Moving forward

Residents are bonded to the state. The strength of new forms of media may be indicated through conversations Alaskans have with each other. Findings indicate that that Alaskan residents are interested in having conversations about image conflicts and already understand some of the issues pointed out in this research. Positive communication through new forms of media between residents and non-residents can only come after residents hold their industry leaders accountable, especially the tourism industry. By understanding how inauthenticity hurts Alaska's image, one can deduce the negative impacts on the tourism industry. These inauthentic narratives dampen the authenticity that Alaska has been known for. If it is profit which motivates change, then one can conclude from this research that the new age of traveler may be facing poor tourism experiences and this may result in damage to the industry.

They are the new marketing experts for destination travel. Their beliefs, values and ideas matter more than ever. Residents realize that tourism is important for the economy and many residents identify with the ideology projected about Alaskans. We should embrace diversity, and value the lived experiences of real Alaskans. They should be encouraged to engage with visitors on subjects like climate change, Alaska Native values and history and resource management.

Social media engagement will also create communication opportunities between residents, between residents and visitors, and between visitors. These opportunities serve to

strengthen Alaska. If residents are present in the social media realm, they will take on a more active role in Alaska's media presence. It may bring Alaskans and visitors together in a way that heals conflict created by the Alaska RT phenomenon. The tourism industry should manage inauthentic experiences in an active way. Visitors can still have positive experiences participating in nostalgic adventures, which included understanding the history of Alaska. The tourism industry has much to offer this new demographic of millennials who want to experience the outdoors and are less interested in the narrative themes of the past.

The tourism industry in Alaska can utilize UCG to tell more authentic stories about the state and its residents. The recent interest in Alaska for this new demographic group may have come from a rejection of previous generation's values, beliefs and attitudes. This mimics the relationship McLuhan described between old forms and new forms of media, which often attempt to solve the problems of the old form. Perhaps, each generation attempts to solve the problems of the previous one. It is clear that the current generation of young travelers is interested in Alaska, and through the limited findings of the interviews, a pattern may be understood that they have different expectations when it comes to authenticity. Their form of medium influences this.

UGC has the ability to naturally transition media-cultivated identities into a less produced and more realistic and beneficial realm. Industry leaders, policy makers and innovators should pay attention to social media and its growing content. They should learn to utilize the medium to the state's benefit, as Alaska is already set up in its reliance on forms of media to reach outside audiences. More research should be done on how visitors interact with social media and what its limitations are.

By shifting their focus away from the stories being told to them, Alaskans can decide what stories they want to tell. They can take off the costume. They can act courageously. They can trust that they will still share a unique and deep bond with each other without having to wear that dusty, frontiersman hat. We can put that hat in a museum where it belongs.

Though all Alaskans are stakeholders in this research, Advocates for Alaskan growth are the groups that these recommendations most apply to. Communication needs to be understood and approaches must be adapted to by those who work specifically with Alaskan image and media. These groups may include, but are not limited to;

- Alaska Travel Industry Association
- Explore Fairbanks
- Travel Alaska
- Individual city and borough tourism branches
- Alaska Native Brotherhood/Sisterhood
- Alaska Conservation Foundation
- The State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development: Division of Economic Development

Conclusion

As McLuhan (1964) foretold, new media often grows as a solution to the shortcomings of previous media. The inauthenticity so prevalent in the reality TV era is being replaced by a medium which acts as a leveler of voices in an open forum. It disables the hierarchy that fueled the RT producers or script writers. Social media may not be pure from the inherent urge we share

to paint ourselves and our lives with a rose colored brush. But, it offers Alaskans a chance to decide on an intimate, individual level who they are and what they want their lives to look like.

Tourism has been largely controlled by narratives that limit the development of discussion on influential topics. If tourists require communication change, the industry will be motivated to meet that demand.

Additionally, social media may hold the key to enabling residents to hold the state accountable and potentially relax their reliance on these themes. As residents of this influential state, Alaskans understand how they have been misrepresented in the media and are ready to embrace their identity through their own forms of social media. The importance of this study is in empowering Alaskan residents who govern, manage and represent Alaska to use the power of narrative, the power of a strong regional identity that bonds its residents together to be positive leaders in modern economical, humanistic and scientific decisions.

Limitations

While this research is just scratching the surface of the impact of media representations on people's perceptions of Alaska, and effects of those perceptions on the state itself, the researcher acknowledges there are limitations to the present research.

First, the researcher acknowledges there are limitations in the theories used to understand and frame the data collected. While the theories used were felt to be the best fit for this particular researcher's experience, a different researcher may have used other theories and perhaps, even quantitative research methods to answer the posed research questions. This is a complex topic, with many ways to approach it depending on the desired outcome. Quantitative studies may be

beneficial in collecting large pools of data on non-resident visitors and resident perceptions as well as data on social media receptiveness and activity in these two groups.

The small number of interview participants (13) is a limitation to the depth of the results. The semi-structured interviews are supplemental to the content analysis portion of the research and can be used as an example for how the concepts and theories may play out in conversation. Findings indicated from this section of research must be understood as limited and simply an indication of a larger pool which should be further researched.

Other limitations for this project include a small pool of visitors. This is due to the time of year in which interviews were conducted. March-April of 2019 was the time period of interview sessions and therefore the more popular summer tourism season had not yet begun. During winter months (October - April), The Museum of the North expects about 20,000 fewer visitors than in summer months (MOTN report, 2015). Additionally, the National Parks System does not open until May (National Parks, 2019) and the first cruise ships do not typically arrive in Alaska until late April, though it may change depending on the season (Cruise Line Agencies of Alaska, 2019).

Similarly, the social stigma surrounding reality TV (Lundy et al., 2008) may have contributed to a hesitancy by participants to acknowledge their relationship to the genre. The medium is commonly seen as being low-brow. Alaskan Residents all shared an open disdain for RT. Non-Residents were less likely to dislike the genre, but particularly the younger participants were more likely to distance themselves from RT.

Moreover, the research was limited by the use of social networks as a recruitment tool for Resident interviews. The researcher utilized personal contacts to interview two of the Resident

participants. The researcher's social network and subjective choice was mitigated by attempting to recruit a diverse and realistic example of the Alaskan population.

Additionally, as with all qualitative research, limitations lie within the subjectivity of the researcher. There may be limitations based on the researcher's personal experience and knowledge of Alaska, as well as experience in the RT industry. These experiences may have contributed to a previous disposition or bias towards some of the themes identified in this project.

The researcher acknowledges these limitations and attempted to mitigate the impact by utilizing the formal interview script with all participants, using Excel spreadsheets to categorize data, and coding the information at least two times to address mistakes. Finally, due to the large variety of alternative methods for data collection, the limitations of this research can be used as an area of expansion for future research.

Future Research

The diverse and variable definition of Alaskan identity is an impossible concept to encapsulate in one body of research. Much like Alaskan weather, the future for Alaska's tourism policies, it's relationship to the media are hard phenomenons to predict. This research focus is seemingly unprecedented in communications research and may simply set up a conversation about this topic. Future researchers should utilize this information to analyze the themes presented and how they relate to the quality of life, the visitor experience, as well as government and industry policies throughout the state.

As the researcher left off on social media, social media behavior in relation to those visiting the state of Alaska is an expansive subject that should be explored. As the third-largest

industry in Alaska (ATIA), tourism behavior is of high importance. Comparative analysis of expectations generated by social media content and the actual experience of tourists could be of high value to the Alaskan tourism industry in managing and mitigating visitor expectations. With more room for lesser-known and diverse narratives through social media, Alaska tourism systems may be able to reassess their image and expand their identity. Nonprofits such as Explore Fairbanks and ATIA would especially benefit from future research on this as they delegate tourism experience for tourists as well as journalists. Social media may hold the key to changing the Alaska narrative for the better. More research will need to be done in this regard.

As arctic tourism continues to rise, researchers have expressed the need to focus on how to manage the spread into ecologically and culturally sensitive areas (Hale, 2018; Runge et al., 2020; Viken, 2013). Additionally, this could help Alaskan residents to sensemake a new climate change narrative to both better understand and mitigate climate change.

Additionally, due to the fact that they regulate the tourism industry, the Alaskan legislature would benefit from research on how to take advantage of Alaska's potential in communication through social media. The legislature would also benefit from a more detailed understanding of Alaska's role, perceived or actual, in American identity. This could change how Alaskans are educated to better promote self-advocacy for the state's rights.

In a 1967 lecture, Marshall McLuhan once said of understanding our mediums, "If you understand the nature of these (media) forms, you can neutralize some of their adverse effects and foster some of their benevolent effects." Continued research on this topic may enable the state to make choices that promote the interests of all people of Alaska in a modern world and

provide a more inclusive and less consumerist vision of Alaska's future, beyond the pioneer persona.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Resident Interview Questions

Demographics

Name/Alias

Age?

Gender?

Lifestyle

How long have you lived in Alaska?

What brought you to Alaska (if moved here)?

How many generations in your family have lived here?

Where do you live?

Do you plan on moving outside of Alaska?

What is your life like?

Can you tell me about a difficult situation regarding life in AK?

Perceptions about Alaska

Do you think your communication about life in Alaska is different depending on if you are talking to a fellow Alaskan or a tourist?

Do you think Alaska is like anywhere else?

What makes someone Alaskan?

How would you describe an Alaskan?

How isolated would you say Alaskans are?

How dangerous do you think life in Alaska is?

Would you describe Fairbanks as urban or rural?

Why?

What role does community play in Alaska?

Do you think living in Alaska is challenging?

How do wild animals relate to life in Alaska?

How does weather affect life in Alaska?

Communication with visitors

How do you think people who do not live in Alaska think about Alaska or Alaskans?

How would you describe the relationship between Alaskans and non Alaskan visitors?

Have you ever had an interaction with someone who had never been to Alaska and had preconceived notions about the way you live in Alaska?

-If so, can you tell me about that interaction?

Can you give me an example of what you may tell someone who has never been to Alaska about your lifestyle?

Do you think there are any misconceptions about Alaska or Alaskans?

What do you think about those conceptions?

Where do you think these conceptions come from?

Media conceptions

Do you think Alaskans have any misconceptions about Alaskan identity?

Have you watched at least one episode of any Alaska based reality TV programming?

If so, which program(s)?

AK bush people?

AK: The last frontier?

Life Below Zero?

Are they an accurate representation of Alaska/Alaskans?

How do you feel about the way media represents AK?

Have you read, watched or listened to any other media that was about life in Alaska?

-If so what?

Can you tell me what you thought about it?

Big picture

Why do you think people watch AK reality shows?

How do you know someone is not an Alaskan?

Do you think Alaskan identity is changing?

What does it mean to you, to be Alaskan?

Appendix B

Non-Resident Interview Questions

Demographics

Name?

age?

Gender?

This visit to Alaska

Why visit Alaska?

-Where have you visited in AK?

How long have you been here?

When do you return home?

Is there anything you see differently now that you are here?

What have you done?

Have you had any interesting conversations with local Alaskans?

Can you tell me about it/them?

What were you looking forward to doing or seeing most in Alaska?

How has your visit to Alaska fit into your expectations?

What do family/friends ask/say about Alaska or about your trip?

Perceptions

Who do you think an Alaskan is?

How would you describe life in Alaska?

Do you think Alaska is like anywhere else?

Have your perceptions of who lives in Alaska changed since you've been here?

How isolated is AK?

How isolated are Alaskans?

How dangerous do you think life in Alaska is?

Would you describe Fairbanks as urban or rural?

Is it more urban, less urban or about as urban as you expected it to be?

What role do you think community and/or family play in Alaska?

Do you think living in Alaska is challenging?

Why or why not?

How do wild animals relate to life in Alaska?

Relationship between alaskans and wild animals?

How do you think weather affects life in Alaska?

Do you think there is a sense of urgency to life in Alaska?

Media influence

Any experience with media representations of life in Alaska? (Books, TV, Movies, Radio)

Please list any Alaskan-based reality shows you have watched at least one episode of?

Do you think you would have chosen to come to Alaska if you did not have the experience with that media?

-(If yes, then) can you please describe why you like them?

How realistic are media representations of AK?

How would you have described Alaska before coming here?

How would you have described Alaskans before coming here?

How would you describe Alaska now that you've been here?

How would you describe Alaskans now that you've been here?

Do you think your experience with media representations of Alaska impacted your communications with locals?

Big Picture

Would you want to move here? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study of representation of Alaska in the mass media. We are asking you to take part as you have stated that you have lived in Alaska longer than one year.

What the study is about:

The purpose of this study is to learn how perceptions of Alaska are influenced by representations of Alaska in the mass media and the relationship it has on communication.

You must be over 18 years old and identify as having resided in Alaska for longer than one year.

What we will ask you to do:

If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct an interview with

you. The interview will include questions about your life in Alaska, relationship to mass media (reality shows, movies, books) about Alaska, and understanding of perceptions relating to such. The interview will take between 15 to 20 minutes to complete. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the interview. Also, with your permission, we would like to potentially utilize your interview in a Master's project which will consist of a broadcasted podcast relating to life in Alaska.

Risks and benefits:

There is the small risk that you may find some of the questions about your life revealing. You may also find that you have strong emotions relating to mass media about Alaska.

The benefits to this study will be a better understanding of why people are drawn to visit Alaska and what it means to be an Alaskan. Your interview may help guide a better understanding of how media impacts Alaskans, communication and harmful misconceptions related to life in Alaska. It is essential that you speak with honesty about said subject matter.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Your answers will be confidential.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you if you consent to the first two options. Research records will be kept in a locked hard drive; only the researchers will have access to the computer behind a locked door. If we tape-record the interview, we will destroy the tape after the allotted time from of one year and four months, which will be on the completion of researcher's Master's project.

Taking part is voluntary:

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with UAF or the researcher. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions:

The researchers conducting this study are Rebecca Lawhorne and Dr. Rich Hum. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Rebecca Lawhorne at ralwawhorne@alaska.edu and Dr. Rich Hum at rehum@alaska.edu (907)474-5897

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 907-474-7800 or access their website https://www.uaf.edu/irb/irb-info/. You may also report your concerns or complaints directly to the UAF IRB board by emailing at uaf-irb@alaska.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Yes ☐ No ☐

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Yes ☐ No ☐

In addition to agreeing to have the interview tape-recorded, I am also allowing the audio to be stored until completion of graduate thesis project and identifiable information such as first name and audio may be used by researcher in a podcast relating to themes about life in Alaska.

Yes ▢ No ▢

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.